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# **Towards a New Timocracy**

### **Abstract**

*Since Antiquity, timocracy has been defined as the government of the rich. Timocracy arose as a degenerate form of aristocracy. The timocrats were opposed to democracy because they considered it the “government of the poor”. The rich classes have always opted for autocratic or oligarchic governments. In the last decade, Italy, the USA and England have seen the influence of rulers who belong to the billionaire class and who deliberately act against the democratic system. They assign a role to each social group and propose to reduce the tax burden on the wealthy classes. They reduce the rights of citizens by abolishing them. They are making access to knowledge and higher education more difficult. They privatise and capitalise social services and pensions. They make it difficult for citizens to participate in elections through media campaigns of discreditation and lies (fake news). In the judiciary, they are prone to reactionary ideas that restrict the rights of minorities. In the executive, they tend to increase spending on the military system for the benefit of upper class investors. This policy will be characterised as timocratic according to the definitions presented in Greek political thought.*

### **Keywords**

timocracy, democracy, oligarchy, the rich, fake news, rights of minorities

## **Introduction**

Plato introduced the neologism “timocracy” in his speeches to refer to a form of government ruled exclusively by individuals who owned capital and property. Since then, however, the term has hardly been used in politics. The aim of this paper is to reuse the term, as it describes tendencies that have been increasingly observed in various countries for several decades. The ideology it describes seems to be spreading rapidly, especially in states with liberal governments. The failures of economic liberalism have given rise to a variety of responses, ranging from populist movements to the development of timocratic models. Liberalism has led to fierce political opposition derived from the social disruption caused by liberal policies. The impact of social networks enabled by artificial intelligence has influenced the spread of liberalism. Social networks have been instrumental in generating opinions often based on disinformation, antisocial behaviour or criticism of opponents through hostile ad hominem procedures. The social impact of artificial intelligence has made it possible to promote a new type of politician whose image is based on his wealth. This article proposes a framework within which current events can be analysed.

Contrary to the assessment of many analysts, the current political situation is a new phenomenon that contemporary philosophy needs to analyse in detail. To do so, it is necessary to use the conceptual and methodological tools of political philosophy and to apply them directly to questions that are, for the most part, eminently political in character. In doing so, we need to extend our

traditional distinctions between practical and theoretical philosophy, without resorting to invented cases or counterfactuals. For the present socio-political situation goes beyond fiction, and we do not need fiction.

In this paper we will examine real facts and recent events on which to base our argument. We will avoid the common mistake of using models of philosophical objectivity that are openly self-serving. I am referring to the events that have unfolded so rapidly, leaving us little time to reflect on the changes that have taken place in recent years and whose consequences have become apparent in recent months. A brief recapitulation of events will allow us to reflect on what has happened.

Since the end of the last century, we have witnessed a new phenomenon in politics: the active participation of tycoons and billionaires in real politics. The first famous case was that of Silvio Berlusconi, who founded and presided over the Mediaset telecommunications company. He went on to organise and lead the political party Forza Italia, which later became part of the People of Freedom coalition. He had also been President of the Italian Council of Ministers three times (1994–1995, 2001–2006 and 2008–2011). Both parties pursued centre-right policies, bringing together liberal tendencies, Catholicism, reformism and moderate positions from the conservative spectrum of the Italian right. Their aim was to represent the interests of businessmen, which is why they advocated tax cuts, a reduction in bureaucracy and, consequently, a reduction in public spending.

In the same vein, Donald Trump won the 2016 election for the Republican Party. His policies were characterised by economic protectionism towards foreign countries by implementing tax cuts for the wealthy classes, typical of a conservative policy with a nationalist and interventionist stance. However, the first unusual event occurred on 6 January 2021, when a group of supporters of the then outgoing President of the United States broke into the Congress building, violating security and occupying parts of the US Capitol.<sup>1</sup> Investigations have shown that this unusual event was instigated by Trump himself.<sup>2</sup> The attack interrupted a joint session of the legislature to count the Electoral College votes and certify Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 presidential election. It remains to be seen how far these events will have political and even federal consequences.<sup>3</sup> Similar processes took place in Germany (Reuters 2022) and Brazil (Cappelli 2023).

Leaving aside these relevant facts, it is worth asking why a US president would act unilaterally and circumvent the rules of the democratic game in order to stay in power at all costs. Another unanswered question is this: How is it possible for a billionaire to mobilise so many people from the lower classes? The policies proposed by the billionaire did not seek to satisfy the needs of the congressional attackers, which raises the problem of explaining what mechanisms he activated to allow certain individuals to identify with a politician who only satisfied the interests of the high-earning upper class.

Another recent development is related to this phenomenon. From 24 July 2019 to 6 September 2022, Boris Johnson was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. As a politician he repeatedly violated the basic principles of the rule of law by holding illegal parties during the pandemic.<sup>4</sup> However, these lapses were seen as trivial offences, typical of a populist politician who was seen as jovial and therefore able to behave grotesquely in contravention of the laws he was promoting in Parliament. Indeed, many citizens felt that such an attitude was appropriate because it allowed them to break the law. The

paradox was that the government of a state would break the laws it imposed on its citizens. However, the press, which supported the Prime Minister's political stance, played down the facts, treating them as mere buffoonery. By using the tactic of scandal, he was able to focus public opinion on unimportant facts, while his policies favouring the high income groups of his party were not given the importance they deserved. The straw that broke the camel's back was the deliberate omission of information about allegations of sexual misconduct against a Conservative MP when he nominated him for the post of deputy chief of staff. The omission led to a wave of resignations from his cabinet. This internal backlash eventually led to the Prime Minister's resignation. His successor, Liz Truss, served from 6 September to 25 October 2022. Meanwhile, the death of Queen Elizabeth II meant that political events were overshadowed for a few weeks by the official funeral. However, the Truss Cabinet's proposal for a tax cut for millionaires worth more than 60 billion euros (Chancellor of the Exchequer by Command of His Majesty 2022, CP 743), combined with a reduction in direct subsidies to families and businesses to pay their gas and electricity bills by the same amount (Chancellor of the Exchequer by Command of His Majesty 2022, 5), set off a chain reaction in the financial and social spheres that crossed borders and entered the political sphere. These proposals succeeded in turning against them the majority of their MPs, the markets, the Bank of England, which had to act against the devaluation of sterling, the country's main economic institutions and virtually the whole of British public opinion. Dave Ramsden has shown the close relationship between the government's fiscal measures in the area of taxation and the political reaction (Ramsden 2022). Her economic policies, which favoured millionaires, led to her resignation. Her successor, Rishi Sunak, who took office on 25 October 2022, is a billionaire Conservative politician and Brexit supporter.

However, the phenomenon of active participation of businessmen and billionaires in state politics is not limited to larger states. We need only think of Andrej Babiš, who was prime minister of the Czech Republic and controlled the country's newspapers, radio and television. And we could go on describing the recent events surrounding Jair Bolsonaro or other politicians, but they would all converge in a few concrete facts: ultra-conservative policies aimed at satisfying the interests of a minority of billionaires who are able to mobilise broad sections of the population through a mixture of nationalism and identifying populism, and who seek to entrench themselves in power at the expense of the constitution and democratic rights. It is therefore worth examining the key elements of this new political movement.

1

A description of the events can be found in: United States Attorneys, District of Columbia 2021.

2

United States House of Representatives 2020.

3

H.Res.24 – *Impeaching Donald John Trump, President of the United States, for high*

*crimes and misdemeanours*. 117<sup>th</sup> Congress (2021–2022).

4

See: Committee of Privileges. UK Parliament. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/289/committee-of-privileges> (accessed on 15 December 2023).

## 1. A New Political Landscape

What do these politicians have in common? First, the tendency of the wealthy to become personally involved in politics.<sup>5</sup> Although they are a minority in society, they manage to mobilise marginal social groups to vote for them through a mixture of outdated nationalism based on recurring slogans such as “Make America Great Again”.<sup>6</sup> Their domination of the media makes possible what has been called “fake news”, “alternative facts” and “parallel realities” (Padilla Gálvez 2004, 409ff). All these euphemisms refer to journalistic content that is disseminated through the media in order to misinform a particular social group. The purpose of this distortion is to mislead and manipulate the decisions of future voters by discrediting politicians or degrading a democratic institution.<sup>7</sup>

In the English-speaking world, economic policy has focused on improving the tax position of a minority of billionaires. In the US, the Trump era and the UK prime minister have pursued protectionist economic policies through pro-steel and pro-aluminium tariff policies, significantly increasing tariffs on imports into the US. Trump signed the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, which reduced the corporate tax rate to 21%, lowered individual tax brackets, increased the child tax credit, doubled the estate tax threshold to \$11.2 million, and capped the estate and tax exemption at \$10,000. The reduction in individual tax rates benefits higher income groups in particular. These policies have led to an increase in the deficit. In the UK, economic policy has moved in the same direction with the exit from the EU.

Presidents from the moneyed class have used the so-called ‘plain folks’ approach, a propaganda technique that abuses fallacies. The plain folks argument is based on presenting the billionaire candidate as an ordinary citizen, an ordinary person who can understand and empathise with the concerns of the lower classes. To do this, it abuses the device of the billionaire presenting himself as someone who shares the experiences of the lower classes. The politician-billionaire narrates a false experience, describing events in extraordinary detail in order to convince voters of his closeness and detailed knowledge of their everyday problems. He abuses the *ad populum* argument by assuming a general opinion. He publicly suggests that the billionaire is aware that inflation is pushing up the price of basic foodstuffs or the shopping basket, making it difficult for families to make ends meet. He also complains that foreign products are flooding the market and squeezing out small businesses. The working class and lower middle class are ready to identify with this narrative. Politicians become “loudspeakers” for a situation often caused by their own liberal and protectionist policies, so the millionaire politician does not really share the same experience. The millionaire tries to convey a sense of closeness and trust to the electorate, because it gives the impression that both share the same problems and therefore the candidate knows how to solve their problems.

At present, the media abuse the so-called “bandwagon effect”, which is based on the fact that many citizens behave in a gregarious manner and follow public opinion, thus abusing the argumentum *ad populum*. Literally, the “bandwagon effect” refers to the strategy of the professional clown Dan Rice, Abraham Lincoln’s personal jester, who used a “bandwagon” in election campaigns to get politicians to “jump on the bandwagon” and support his candidacy. The bandwagon effect is based on the general rule that beliefs spread and grow when people want to associate themselves with success. Opinions

change according to the viewpoint adopted by the majority. This so-called “majority” is propagated by the media.

The speeches are riddled with fallacies, such as the abuse of argumentum ad hominem, which consists of discrediting the opposing politician or opponent because he or she holds a contrary position. We also find irrelevant conclusions. For example, the argument in Trump’s campaign was that he was a great businessman and should therefore win the presidential election, even though his business attitude has nothing to do with political leadership. There has also been an abuse or selective use of evidence, much of it circumstantial or anecdotal, with the most relevant evidence being overlooked in order to present an inappropriate conclusion. It has also been practised in political narrative. The half-truth fallacy, which consists of misleading or false phrases that contain an aspect that is true but cannot be generalised.<sup>8</sup> This type of fallacy is used to damage an opponent’s credibility. Ridicule is also used in political discourse. When the opponent objects to the use of fallacies, the objection is usually rejected on the grounds that the proponent is being inconsistent in that the criticism is equally applicable to the person making it. In this way the objection is rejected without discussing the substance of the objection.

The fallacies used make it possible to influence the electorate to participate in elections in favour of a candidate who will neither ensure that their needs are met nor solve their most pressing problems. Participation takes place through a very important paradigm shift: the replacement of the concept of “power” (Weber 1980, 28) with that of “authority”.<sup>9</sup> The essential difference between the two concepts is that whatever power relationship exists in an exchange relationship, it is constituted on interest, and the relationship is therefore considered to have been entered into voluntarily. Therefore, power is a person’s ability or capacity to exercise his or her will over another. Authority, on the other hand, is the formal or legal right of a person to make decisions and to order others to act. Authority relationships are those in which the change in behaviour is ultimately due to the command to obey, regardless of the interests of either party. Authoritative relationships are those in which the behavioural change is based on the command to obey, regardless of the interests of either party.

This shift of paradigm is important for understanding the changes that have taken place in today’s democratic systems. If we define *authority* as the

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The concept of wealthy classes refers to the interaction of the variables of wealth, power and prestige. The first refers to the economic prosperity of a social group. The second refers to the political and economic influence to change the decisions of the governing authorities. The third refers to the privileged position in certain decision-making processes.

6

The slogan was first used during Ronald Reagan’s 1980 campaign through the phrase “Let’s Make America Great Again”. Donald Trump simplified it during his 2016 presidential campaign into the formula “Make America Great Again”.

7

Generally, a campaign is waged against the judiciary. Either by leaving vacancies vacant, or

by replacing the positions with judges linked to a particular ideology to the detriment of the principles of independence.

8

Through the half-truth fallacy, cognitive biases are introduced into political discourse that are difficult to eliminate since they distort the perception generated through erroneous induction generalizations.

9

Weber distinguishes two types of “*Herrschaft*”, on the one hand, one resulting from a specific constellation of interests – as it appears in an oligopolistic or monopolistic market – and another generated by authority through competition to impose order at the same time as the duty to obey. Cf. (Weber 1980, 542ff).

legitimate or socially accepted power that a person or group possesses and exercises over the rest of society, then we begin to understand the shift that is taking place. The timocrat comes to power democratically, but tries to hold on to it by emphasising that it has been usurped. To do this, he conducts a campaign of lies, implying that the electoral processes have been falsified by promoting a campaign of accusations of fraud. The element of legitimacy is crucial to the notion of authority and is the primary means by which authority is distinguished from the more general notion of power. The moment authority legitimises itself, it can use force or violence, as we have seen recently in the US and Brazil. This violence is carried out by subordinates who obey orders or slogans. This personal interpretation of these new leaders is a misrepresentation of the democratic concept of “power”. It is important to understand how this process came about. In order to give a coherent answer to this question, it is necessary to reflect on similar processes that took place in antiquity and to see if they generally coincide with the phenomena we have been experiencing in recent years.

## 2. Timocracy, a Useful Concept?

Plato first introduced the term *timocracy* in the *Republic*,<sup>10</sup> defining it as a political regime based on the love of honour<sup>11</sup> and triumph.<sup>12</sup> We will argue in these pages that the term *timocracy* is a useful concept, not only because of its general – and therefore original – status, but also because of the role it plays in a broader theory of the political. From a concept formation approach, concepts are “useful” to the theories in which they are embedded, and these theories are driven by cognitive interests that cannot be justified by the theories themselves. It is therefore necessary to start from this cognitive interest. The dominant cognitive interest requires that we trace the steps of specificity and universality and apply them to the current processes of Western modernisation. This application must be understood as a purely political question, which in turn generates an all-encompassing puzzle of recent social processes.

From our point of view, the facts described above can be seen as a paradigmatic case of a timocratic politician as described in Greek philosophy. The Platonic description shows the obvious processes of degeneration of the American and English political classes, which have their followers in many countries of the world, as the recent events in Brazil show. According to our philosopher, the person who has come to power is a politician and economist who exclusively represent a minority of the upper class of millionaires and property owners, which is why he characterises them without further ado as an “aristocracy of money” (Platon, *Republica*, 545b).<sup>13</sup>

Plato describes this new type of politician in detail. In the *Republic* he outlines five regimes. The first is aristocracy, which degenerates into a timocracy (Platon, *Republica*, 545c). The timocracy consists of superior men who love “triumph” and “honour”. The timocracy chooses its leaders with an eye to those of the highest spirit and simplest mind. For this reason they are apt to sympathise with the Spartan constitution.<sup>14</sup> Plato proposes that the transformation of the aristocratic system into a timocracy be formalised by a mathematical formula (Platon, *Republica*, 546c). In timocratic systems, education will degenerate<sup>15</sup> in the new generations of younger people, who will value gymnastics more and thus become less educated (Platon, *Republica*, 546d). This decline in education will not prevent the discrimination that will be

arbitrarily applied to the citizens. This process will create in the polis a process of social dissimilarity which produces an inharmonious anomaly leading to hatred and war (Platon, *Republica*, 547a). On the one hand, a small group of citizens will engage in trade and money-making; on the other hand, a majority group will oppose wealth and disregard money. The dispute will end in a compromise: they will agree to own private property and enslave their fellow citizens by means of alibis aimed at creating financial disadvantage. This gave rise to the timocracy, which was seen as an intermediate system between aristocracy and oligarchy.

According to Plato, this new social group is exclusively oriented towards profit and the acquisition of property and houses, as well as the increase of its financial base (Platon, *Republica*, 547b–c). In timocracy relations are based on obedience to the rulers and a contempt for the common people, as well as on the exaltation of warlike and gymnastic exercises. It rejects philosophical reflection and simplicity of character, which are replaced by military order. The art of war prevails over the art of peace. The ruler is no longer a philosopher, but an extravagant love of gain is born - the principle is: get what belongs to others and save your own. The main characteristic of the timocratic state is elitism and ambition. This is why Plato characterises the timocrat as an arrogant and uneducated person who loves quarrels. The timocrat is ruthless towards the lower classes but obeys the rulers. He loves power and honour,

10

The original text reads: “ἄρ’ οὖν, ὥσπερ ἠρξάμεθα ἐν ταῖς πολιτείαις πρότερον σκοπεῖν τὰ ἥθη ἢ ἐν τοῖς ιδιώταις, ὡς ἐναργέστερον ὄν, καὶ νῦν οὕτω πρῶτον μέντην φιλότιμον σκεπτέον πολιτείαν —ὄνομα γὰρ οὐκ ἔχω λεγόμενον ἄλλο: ἢ τιμοκρατίαν ἢ τιμαρχίαν αὐτήν κλητέον—πρὸς δὲ ταύτην τὸν τοιοῦτον” – Platon, *Republica*, 545b.

11

In Greece, thymocracy alluded to “esteem” and “honor” – from Ancient Greek, “τιμή” – and government – “κράτος” –, so it originally referred to a government of those who possessed money.

12

Triumph is introduced earlier. Cf. Platon, *Republica*, 545a.

13

Aristotle defines the aristocracy of money as follows: “ἐκκλησιάζειν οἱ μὲν ἀπὸ τιμήματος οὐθενός οἱ δ’ ἀπὸ μακροῦ τ”. Arist. *Pol.* 1294b3.

14

The Spartan state was considered a militaristic system made up of rigid social strata. Cf. Polibio, *Historia*, 6. 3, 8.

15

There was a widespread belief in Greece of a previous “golden age” characterized by simplicity, which had been followed by human degeneration and decadence. Plato’s theory of degradation established a gradual

deterioration through successive stages that gradually degenerated from timocracy to oligarchy and from oligarchy to democracy and finally to despotism. According to Plato’s political conception, the terms *timocracy*, *oligarchy*, *democracy*, and *despotism* denote different processes and cannot be interchanged. The distinction between the four systems is described by Socrates as follows: timocracy arises from aristocracy due to the outbreak of a civil war between the ruling class and the majority. Timocracy is a government of honourable people. Timocracy becomes oligarchy, a system of government where power is in the hands of a few people from a privileged social class. As this socio-economic divide widens, so too do the tensions that arise between social groups. The majority will overthrow the wealthy minority, and democracy will replace the oligarchy. Democratic governments maintain the sovereignty of the people and the right of the people to elect and control their rulers. These freedoms divide the population into different socio-economic classes. Tensions between the ruling class and the people lead them to elect a demagogue, which ultimately leads to a despotism that controls the people absolutely. The Greek theory of cycles, with its endless and monotonous iteration, excluded the possibility of permanent progress. For this reason, links are generated between the thymocratic state and Sparta; the democratic state and Athens after Pericles; the oligarchic state is related to Corinth; and finally, the tyrannical state has Syracusan traits.

which he hopes to achieve through arms. Therefore, he is fond of gymnastics and hunting. As he grows older, he becomes greedy. The new “young timocrat” is described as follows: he is sometimes the son of a good father, who lives in a badly organised state, who shuns honours, offices, trials and all such entanglements, and who is willing to suffer undermining as long as he does not get into trouble (Platon, *Republica*, 549c). The young man realises that when he grows up he must be more of a man than his father, for the man who minds his own business is regarded as an idiot, while the busybody is honoured and esteemed, leading him to embrace ambition and honour as the ends on which “self-government” (cf. Foucault 2008) is based. Timocrats assume roles of political leadership, moral authority, social and economic privilege, and control of property.

Aristotle is more sparing in his assessment of timocracy but introduces new elements (Arist., *Ethic. Nico.*, 1160a–1161a). He begins by distinguishing between monarchy, aristocracy and timocracy in his *Tripolitos* system.<sup>16</sup> These political regimes have their deviations, which are seen as corruptions. Monarchy corrupts into tyranny, aristocracy into oligarchy and timocracy into democracy. The introduction of the concept of “corruption”<sup>17</sup> changes the theoretical perspective. Corrupt processes are opposed to virtue, which is equivalent to the unnatural. The fact that a politician seeks to make money and that government is not the result of relations between citizens are the main concrete ways in which the meaning of politics is distorted. Aristotle is aware that part of his task is to replace Platonic theory. Using the key concept of corruption, he overcomes Plato by offering a more plausible ontology of the political world, partly because he focuses on socio-political transformations. Aristotle uses his usual linguistic analysis of the previous view to further clarify the concepts necessary for the subject, showing how existing terms and notions are insufficient to do the necessary work. Aristotle pays particular attention to the cohesion of the timocrats and thus succeeds in giving a new twist to the discussion of this political system, injecting a freshness that illustrates his personal voice in the debate. He considers that timocracy is based on property, in which all are equal, and therefore pretends to be a government of the multitude.<sup>18</sup> By analogy, however, he points out that equality has similarities with the “government of brothers”, since they differ in age. If the difference in age is too great, there is no brotherhood between them.<sup>19</sup> The term “timocracy” has not been studied in Renaissance and modern political theories, nor in current ones. As a result, it has disappeared from political theories, dissolving into other phenomena. Timocracy is often confused with despotism. Other authors do not make a distinction between the populist demagogy that arises in democratic systems and the timocracy. In the following paragraphs we will analyse some characteristics of timocratic processes in detail.

### 3. The Open Question of Structural Disadvantage

It appears that Plato’s description of this new form of government has so far been fulfilled, and the model designed has never been closer to what has happened in recent years: Liz Truss wanted to introduce a form of government in which political privileges depended on the wealth of certain citizens who belonged exclusively to the wealthy classes. Such a liberal policy will be implemented by reducing investment in education, thus making the population less educated over time and allowing the introduction of discriminatory

practices in the social sphere. Unfortunately, public opinion and investors reacted rapidly, and she was forced to resign as prime minister after a sharp fall in sterling. However, a group of hardliners in the Conservative Party have put their faith in the timocratic solution par excellence. Mr Sunak is undoubtedly a representative of a new underclass of the financial aristocracy, dedicated exclusively to self-serving politics.

There are many questions, but the most disturbing is this: How did we get here? Unlike the populist Boris Johnson, whose anti-EU nationalism and nineteenth-century English populism still managed to attract the working classes to the polls, Sunak will have to postpone direct aid to his party partners until the next election. If Plato is right, the future of Britain will be a period of investment in sporting spectacles to dazzle the masses. The cultivation of physical strength will go hand in hand with the relentless pursuit of honours and wealth. In his view, the men of the timocracy made their love of hunting and war a virtue.

This form of government determined political privilege by the wealth a citizen possessed. Privilege defined a society based on wealth. In fact, the qualification of wealth was never considered as a characteristic on which to base democracy.<sup>20</sup> For this social group, democratic systems were rightly seen as “the system of the poor” (Platon, *Republica*, 557a). The link between “democracy” and “poverty” is based on two strategies: firstly, that poor citizens lack resources, so their political inclinations will be directed primarily towards satisfying their primary needs. Secondly, that the poor lack the knowledge to decide effectively on matters of state. For this reason, timocracy rejects any system that allows for collective decision-making at the state and private levels. The anti-democratic position stems from the fact that their view is based on elitist thinking, believing that a small group of members can best run the state by satisfying the common interests of the majority. For this reason, Plato proposed a *technè politikè*, which would regulate economic activity through the specialisation of citizens in order to control their social status (Platon, *Republica*, 369e–370c), so that each citizen would carry out a particular trade according to his natural aptitude (Platon, *Leges*, 84 d–e). This proposal

16

In his own words: “πολιτείας δ’ ἐστὶν εἶδη τρία, ἴσαι δὲ καὶ παρεκβάσεις, οἷον φθοραὶ τούτων. εἰσὶ δ’ αἱ μὲν πολιτεῖαι βασιλεία τε καὶ ἀριστοκρατία, τρίτη δὲ ἀπὸ τιμημάτων, ἣν τιμοκρατικὴν λέγειν οἰκεῖον φαίνεται, πολιτείαν δ’ αὐτὴν εἰώθασιν οἱ πλείστοι καλεῖν.” – Arist., *Ethic. Nico.*, 1160a30–34.

17

When Aristotle introduces the term *corruption* – in Greek: “φθορᾶς” – he is raising the problem of the rationality of change. In doing so he emphasizes studying the dissolving power of diversity and change.

18

Aristotle says: “πλήθους γὰρ βούλεται καὶ ἡ τιμοκρατία εἶναι, καὶ ἴσοι πάντες οἱ ἐν τῷ τιμήματι.” – Arist., *Ethic. Nico.*, 1160b17–18.

19

It is interesting to note that Thomas Aquinas makes several specific references to timocracy.

He states in an Aristotelian sense that we are dealing with a system of government with a property qualification for the ruling class. Thomas Aquinas, *Secundam Philosophum, Expositio in 8 libros politicorum*, Poli, lib. 111, cap. 5. And in the *Summa Theologica* he states: “regnum est una sex specierum politiarum, sed nulla species prudentiae sumitur secundum alias quinque politias, quae sunt aristocratia, timocratia, tyrannis, oligocratia, democratia”. – Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica, Secunda Secundae*, Q. 50. Art. 1 ob. 2.

20

The same point of view is shared by E. Schütrumpf and H.-J. Gehrke in their commentary on Aristotle’s *Politics* when they state “Generell galt Vermögensqualifikation nicht als demokratisch”. – Aristoteles 1996, vol. III, 342.

prevents the excessive accumulation of wealth and the accentuation of economic inequalities between citizens. On the contrary, the timocrat wanted the citizen to remain uneducated in order to increase his wealth.

However, these considerations still do not adequately capture the phenomena presented at the beginning of this paper. The central question is whether timocracy, as a term for current structural forms of government, needs to be defined more precisely. In other words, we need to consider timocracy as a new concept from a more precise perspective. If we examine the terms associated with timocracy, we should not simply ask ourselves how these terms were actually used in antiquity, nor should we limit ourselves to stating our intuitive pre-understanding of the term; rather, we should ask ourselves what purpose these terms can serve, what use they can bring to us, in a sense improving their content to see if they adequately decipher certain phenomena of our contemporary life.

Against the background of timocratic governments, such as those of the USA and England, among others, a new problem appears, which has to do with the clarification of a different problem than that of conceptualisation. It is the existence of a structural disadvantage which has led to the maximisation of profits for a very small section of society and the persistent impoverishment of large sections of society. In the face of such empirical data, liberalism has always argued that this phenomenon is rooted in individual vice. The individualist ideology is betting that most people who cannot make ends meet on their wages, or rent a decent house on their wages, have no choice but to see themselves as victims. Obviously, “victimhood” is not the answer to an increasingly pervasive phenomenon in our society, nor does it allow us to understand the diverse and complex structural conditions of individual experiences of discrimination.

The main problem is how a structural disadvantage in society has come about: how is it possible for a small group in society to accumulate so much capital while paying so little tax, and to take power for the sole purpose of exempting themselves from paying tax? How is it possible that such political groups intend to cause an involution of civil rights? One of the most important problems posed by timocratic leaders to the rule of law has to do with the judicial system. The systematic degradation of the judicial system, through a liberal policy of reducing the number of judges and administrative staff in the judiciary, has meant that certain crimes cannot be prosecuted, because the policy pursued by the timocrats is to reduce procedural deadlines as much as possible, so that crimes are subject to the statute of limitations. Common crimes include prevarication, embezzlement, falsification of documents, etc. In general, timocrats present themselves to their movement as victims of the judicial system. Legality, which guarantees the proper functioning of the rule of law, is paradoxically denounced by the populist reaction as arbitrary when it examines the anomalous behaviour of these politicians. The victim of the timocrats wants to consolidate the privilege of impunity as political leaders. From this point of view, the timocrat politician always considers himself innocent of any accusation thanks to his political alibi. The innocence or guilt of the timocrat cannot be judged by a “politicised” court acting in the service of the defence of the democratic state. This type of argument reveals the autocratic tendency of timocratic leaders, who believe that they can act outside the control imposed by the distribution of powers by attributing to themselves privileges and immunities that are not enshrined in the democratic constitution.

In order to provide an adequate answer to these questions, we need to have a structural (social) explanation of how these new timocrats have come to power and gained a foothold in state structures, thereby endangering the rule of law. Above all, we need to know what mechanisms are in place to prevent society from taking action when certain social groups are unjustly marginalised or excluded from rights in their own society. Structural problems may be as simple as: age, gender, class, ableism, etc. The main question is how a social group of the rich has emerged that has maximised their profits to such an extent that it is trying to change the form of the state by destroying the democratic rule of law and gaining even more by exempting itself from taxation. In other words, they are trying to impose exclusive privileges for a class of billionaires in order to enrich themselves even more and create even more unjust situations.

As we have seen in the case of Silvio Berlusconi, Donald Trump, Boris Johnson and Liz Truss or Jair Bolsonaro, these ruthless politicians tend to create their own values and systematically ignore the law and the moral rules of society as a whole.<sup>21</sup> The economic elites have gradually distanced themselves from the general population. Through economic policies of not taxing inheritances and dividends, reducing taxes on management salaries and severance pay, they have made the rich increasingly wealthy, and their power in politics and society has grown with their wealth. The middle classes, on the other hand, have to pay taxes on the purchase of goods and services, fuel and mortgages.

Timocracy is the political response of an elite collective, which refers to the upper class of the wealthy who, by virtue of their position or property, are in a position to significantly influence social developments. This influence is exercised through donations and patronage. Through such processes, which are also untaxed, they have the opportunity, usually without any democratic legitimacy, to shape social processes – and at the same time to save taxes on a large scale. These processes have undermined democracy from within and led to clearly timocratic processes. Rarely, because they also dominate the media, do they publicise the tax avoidance strategies of the rich and powerful and further undermine the confidence of the general population in the tax and legal system. This has led to a growing disenchantment with politics and, not least, to the rise of right-wing and left-wing populism as a clear response to influence and overturn democratic structures.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. False Alternatives: Athens *versus* Sparta

Faced with this new situation, two objections can be raised against our proposal, which is a philosophical reflection on a social process. The first is the problem of academic abstraction or political theory. Studies of the consequences of ochlocracy have often sought to be pigeonholed into political tendencies (Padilla Gálvez 2017, 167ff). It is also suggested that many reflections on social processes are too far removed from the real concerns of everyday practice. But this criticism hardly refutes the arguments outlined above. As

21

See the introduction to the book by Hartmann 2018, 1. That work studies the social processes of elites that tend to generate a parallel world with its own rules.

22

Hartmann 2018, 24ff.

long as philosophy does not become empirical research, it will continue to work with conceptual content, with abstractions, with models, or even with individual cases described in an ideal-typical way.

Obviously, we are faced with a new challenge in working out whether the new state reality can be modelled. It is well known that descriptive modelling has to abstract from certain aspects of reality. However, while descriptive modelling focuses on the essential elements of the object being described and tries to get closer to its real properties, idealising modelling designs the object as it should ideally be. Therefore, only idealising modelling can be described as detached from reality; in a sense, it does not want to provide a representation of reality at all. Obviously, it is difficult for an idealising model of today's timocracy to shed light on the complex process we are currently experiencing. There are only attempts to sketch real individual cases as representative of attitudes and structures that go beyond them. Discussion is inevitable. However, political philosophy is often more successful in the detailed study of individual cases than in empirical surveys. Whether the concept of timocracy can be successfully established is, of course, an open question. But the assumption that profit maximisation and the establishment of privileges for a particular social group to which the rulers belong do not exist as social phenomena to be seriously addressed would simply be adventurous and would clash with empirical data. If democratic restrictions and attempts to hold on to power by violent means and in the absence of evidence of alleged fraudulent vote counting are a serious problem.

In any case, it is important to link the events and processes currently taking place in several states to a more analytical-conceptual approach to timocracy. The alternative to our analysis is wrong. Indeed, it must always be kept in mind that many arguments based on conceptual-analytical "acrobatics" often conceal harsh ideological positions. It must be remembered that strategies of concealment are the order of the day in reflexive work, and the media play an important role in this. These media, by the way, have been taken over by groups of multi-millionaires and are therefore not interested in publicising their wealth.

One of the most recurrent discussions among the moneyed classes is whether the state system should be considered in its "Spartan" or "Athenian" form. This means that the timocratic model is based on privileged elites who rule the government in an autocratic manner, as they question the effectiveness of the democratic system. It should therefore be noted that the wealthy classes have always been opposed to democracy, which has been considered the "system of the poor" (Platon, *Republica*, 557a; Aristoteles, 1996, vol. III, 342) since antiquity. The only viable alternative for many millionaires was to opt for an alternative system like that of the Spartans. This created an ideal antagonism that has endured to this day: Sparta versus Athens. But what was the main difference?

The Spartan political system is a fiction. The so-called Spartan state would be governed by ultra-liberal principles based on the subordination of all public interests to the private interests of a minority. At the same time, it would impose a social structure modelled on military life, in which the education of the young is entrusted to private institutions. More generally, it can be expressed in three areas: military education, contempt for poverty and love of country. In this way, privileges are granted to minority groups and a certain discipline is introduced for the rest of the population.<sup>23</sup> In the Spartan system there was

a symbiosis in which the different political systems known in the Greek world coexisted: A form of government in which the diarchy was at the head of the state; the oligarchy, which established the “gerusia” or council of elders; the “tyranny”, which consisted of the governing council of the “ephors” – from the Greek “Ἐφορος” – the name given to certain magistrates; and democracy, which was the popular assembly called “apella”.<sup>24</sup> This new group of millionaires would thus hold power indefinitely, as some of its politicians have tried to do. But Plato already warned us that this form of state was ruled by tyrants (Platon, *Leges* IV, 712d), because they ruled the state as despots.

It is not surprising that the economically dominant classes always opted for a Spartan system to the detriment of the democratic one. The Spartan model was ruled by the economically stronger class, while the Athenian model left more room for the citizen. State decisions were limited to a specific group in the Spartan model, whereas in the Athenian model a larger number of citizens were able to participate in the polis. Democracy faces a serious problem that it will have to solve in the coming years. This will depend on the maintenance of a rule of law that guarantees the fundamental rights of citizens and a certain plurality.

As we have seen in previous years, the President of the United States has nominated a group of ultra-conservative judges. The conservative majority on the US Supreme Court has radically overturned protections and rights that have been established for decades. Their decisions are in line with the policies of the Republican Party and the country’s conservatives. The abolition of abortion rights is perhaps the most controversial recent decision. The Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, the case that legalized abortion nationwide in 1973. The US Supreme Court has also restricted the right of public schools to uphold the secular state, ruling in favour of a public-school teacher who instructed his students in Christian prayer during games and practices. It has also overturned a 108-year-old law on the regulation and restriction of the free carrying of firearms in New York state. Finally, the Court’s conservative justices prevailed in a decision that deprived the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) of the power to regulate carbon dioxide emissions from power plants. The US Supreme Court is thus setting a political agenda against the rights of citizens. Congress is no longer required to make policy, but a minority is imposing a programme of rights cuts without it being debated or voted on in parliament. And these judges are acting as men of “honour” against the rights of the citizens. They operate within a democratic order by circumventing democratic procedures and imposing minority beliefs on most citizens. This exemplifies a timocratic attitude.

23

Paradigmatic cases can be observed with the behaviour of B. Johnson during the pandemic. Another example is the sexual behaviours of S. Berlusconi or D. Trump. Also the pro-militarist attitude of J. Bolsonaro can be interpreted as an attitude with double standards (Cappelli 2023).

24

Herodotus says: “ὡς γὰρ ἐπετρόπευσε τάχιστα, μετέστησε τὰ νόμιμα πάντα, καὶ ἐφύλαξε ταῦτα μὴ παραβαίνειν: μετὰ δὲ τὰ ἐς πόλεμον ἔχοντα, ἐνωμοτίας καὶ τριηκάδας καὶ συσσίτια, πρὸς τε τούτοις τοὺς ἐφόρους καὶ γέροντας ἔστησε Λυκοῦργος.” – Herodoto, *Historia*, Libro I, Sección 65. 5.

## Conclusion

In Athenian political theory, all philosophers agreed that timocracy was an “unjust” regime. For Plato, aristocracy degenerates into timocracy when, through a miscalculation on the part of the ruling class, it includes people of an inferior nature. One of the mistakes timocratic systems make in choosing their leaders is to choose politicians with a more limited mind. According to Plato, the model state that came closest to timocracy was the city-state of Sparta, because it resembled this form of government. Today we might describe Sparta as an autocratic state, in contrast to the Athenian democratic model. The social structure of timocracies is based on a class society in which the ruling class has privileges and the lower classes have to obey strict rules. As Plato points out, timocratic societies degenerate into corrupt systems.

In the article we pointed out that the very fact of using the term “timocracy” implies taking a position. Is timocracy a political regime or the evaluation of a political regime? This essential question is one of the keys to understanding the problem. Today’s timocracy is frightening because of the technical means that can make it effective – mass media, the spread of fake news, etc. But first and foremost, the problem of recognising it in time remains essential. In this way it will be possible to verify its nature. If timocracy is a form of political regime, substantive timocracy, it will be possible to establish universal guidelines that transcend a given historical period. If, on the other hand, timocracy is a way of assessing a given political regime, one may or may not be in its presence, depending on the criteria used by the agent observing it at each historical moment. The possibility of understanding the real content of the concept of timocracy derives from a process similar to that of justice itself. And the idea of conquering nature, both in the classical and modern sense, is not alien to either concept. Timocracy was originally reformist in character. It was an innovative regime that put an end to aristocratic or monarchical power. The old aristocracy subjugated a people who, through trade, began to develop a new way of life that was previously unthinkable. At that time, the understanding of justice was as important as the understanding of reality itself. The change introduced in Athens implies that there is an intermediate point between what is just and what is real. This, together with the new social forms and changes in the political order, culminating in practice in the revolution brought about by trade for the transformation of everyday life, configures an idea of justice in accordance with the new reality. In this new state of affairs, either a reform is agreed upon, imposing new rulers in an aristocratic, timocratic or oligarchic manner, chosen according to abstract principles such as “honour”, resulting from the war. Or a new social group, taking advantage of equality, will introduce a democratic system which, over time, will degenerate into a form of despotism.

There is a strong parallel between the classical descriptions and the events of recent years, when a group of millionaires have come to power. The enrichment of the upper classes has increased considerably to the detriment of the lower classes. They have tried to exempt themselves from paying taxes. At the same time, they have applied a liberal model that has reduced investment in public services and education, creating greater economic and social contradictions and social tensions. The judicial system has been changed so that it cannot prosecute corruption and embezzlement. The establishment of privileges by multi-millionaire politicians and the prevalence of the exclusive interests of the power elite mean the introduction of timocratic elements in today’s politics. Politics is characterised by the exclusive politics of a certain

social group, oriented towards profit, the acquisition of property and the increase of its financial base. Their policies are aimed at maximising their profits through tax breaks and exemptions. They use the media to gain power, spreading false news and developing parallel “narratives” based on fallacies. They generally use the “common man” approach to make people believe that they identify with the problems of the lower and middle classes. However, when they come to power, they reduce the rights of citizens.

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**Jesús Padilla Gálvez**

**Prema novoj timokraciji**

**Sažetak**

*Od Antike se timokracija definira kao vladavina bogatih. Timokracija je nastala kao degenerirani oblik aristokracije. Timokrati su bili protiv demokracije jer su je smatrali »vladom siromašnih«. Bogate klase uvijek su se odlučivale za autokratske ili oligarhijske vlade. U posljednjem desetljeću Italija, Sjedinjene Američke Države i Engleska iskusiše utjecaj vladara koji pripadaju klasi milijardera i koji namjerno djeluju protiv demokratskog sustava. Svakoj društvenoj skupini dodjeljuju ulogu i predlažu smanjenje poreznog opterećenja bogatih klasa. Smanjuju prava građana tako što ih ukidaju. Otežavaju pristup znanju i visokom obrazovanju. Privatiziraju i kapitaliziraju socijalne usluge i mirovine. Putem medijskih kampanja diskreditacije i laži (fake news) otežavaju sudjelovanje građana na izborima. U pravosuđu su skloni reakcionarnim idejama koje ograničavaju prava manjina. U izvršnoj vlasti nastoje povećati potrošnju na vojni sustav u korist investitora iz više klase. Ova će politika biti okarakterizirana kao timokratska prema definicijama predstavljenim u grčkoj političkoj misli.*

**Ključne riječi**

timokracija, demokracija, oligarhija, bogati, lažne vijesti, prava manjina

**Jesús Padilla Gálvez**

**Auf dem Weg zu einer neuen Timokratie**

**Zusammenfassung**

*Seit der Antike wird die Timokratie als Regierung der Reichen definiert. Die Timokratie ist als degenerierte Form der Aristokratie entstanden. Die Timokraten waren gegen die Demokratie, weil sie sie als „Regierung der Armen“ betrachteten. Die reichen Klassen haben sich immer für autokratische oder oligarchische Regierungen entschieden. Italien, die USA und England erlebten im letzten Jahrzehnt den Einfluss von Herrschern, die zur Klasse der Milliardäre gehören und bewusst gegen das demokratische System handeln. Sie weisen jeder sozialen Gruppe eine Rolle zu und schlagen vor, die Steuerbelastung der wohlhabenden Klassen zu verringern. Sie schränken die Rechte der Bürger ein, indem sie sie abschaffen. Sie erschweren den Zugang zu Wissen und höherer Bildung. Sie privatisieren und kapitalisieren Sozialdienste und Renten. Sie erschweren den Bürgern die Teilnahme an Wahlen durch Diskreditierungs- und Lügenkampagnen in den Medien (fake news). In der Justiz neigen sie zu reaktionären Ideen, die die Rechte von Minderheiten einschränken. In der Exekutive neigen sie dazu, die Ausgaben für das Militärsystem zugunsten der Investoren der Oberschicht zu erhöhen. Diese Politik wird nach den Definitionen des griechischen politischen Denkens als timokratisch charakterisiert.*

**Schlüsselwörter**

Timokratie, Demokratie, Oligarchie, die Reichen, Fake News, Rechte von Minderheiten

**Jesús Padilla Gálvez**

**Vers une nouvelle timocratie**

**Résumé**

*Depuis l'Antiquité, la timocratie est définie comme le gouvernement des riches. La timocratie a émergé comme une forme dégénérée de l'aristocratie. Les timocrates s'opposaient à la démocratie la considérant comme le « gouvernement des pauvres ». Les classes riches ont toujours opté pour des gouvernements autocratiques ou oligarchiques. Au cours de la dernière décennie, l'Italie, les États-Unis et l'Angleterre ont vu apparaître l'influence de dirigeants appartenant à la classe des milliardaires et agissant délibérément contre le système démocratique ; un rôle a été assigné à chaque groupe social en proposant de réduire la charge fiscale des classes aisées ; les droits des citoyens ont été restreints en les abolissant ; l'accès au savoir et à l'enseignement*

*supérieur ont été rendus plus difficile ; les services sociaux et les pensions ont été privatisés et capitalisés ; la participation des citoyens aux élections a été compromise par le biais de campagnes médiatiques de discréditation et de mensonges (fake news). Au sein du système judiciaire, les timocrates sont enclins à adhérer aux idées réactionnaires qui restreignent les droits des minorités. Au sein du pouvoir exécutif, ils s'appliquent à augmenter les dépenses du système militaire au profit des investisseurs de la classe supérieure. Cette politique sera caractérisée comme une timocratie sur la base des définitions présentées dans la pensée politique grecque.*

**Mots-clés**

timocratie, démocratie, oligarchie, riches, fake news, droits des minorités