

Nitesh Mathur

Dr. Mintz

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Government: A Public Servant or a Curse to Its Community?

In the profoundly politically centered plays, *Oresteia* by Aeschylus and *The Theban Plays* by Sophocles, the tragedians incorporate various concepts of governments like lawless anarchy, autocratic monarchy, and judicial democracy to illustrate the diverse relationships between the rulers and their respective people. The two most prevalent political systems visible in the plays are monarchy and democracy. A monarchy bestows power to a single ruler, while a democracy instills power to the people through a system of assembly and voting. Aeschylus and Sophocles dramatically demonstrate how the power struggle between these types of governmental systems produced a plethora of reactions from the public, especially—intimidation, optimistic reliance, and defiance.

Establishing fear is a key element of imposing power. In *Antigone*, for example, King Creon's quixotic ideologies and punitive actions as the monarch of Thebes indirectly cause him to suppress dissent, which produces immense fear among the public. It elevated to such a level that eventually his loyal son, Haemon, was provoked to reveal that "the common man" actually "lives in terror of [Creon's] frown" (Soph. *An.* 690-91). The intimidation is clearly evident as the watchman proclaims that even though "bringing trouble on [his] friends is agony," "it's nature's way for [him] to put [his] own survival first" (Soph. *An.* 436-441). His obligated response to Creon effectively displays the dreadful sentiment that spread through the citizens' minds as they were protecting themselves at the expense of others. Not only were they

sacrificing their fellow citizens but were also subjugating their own freedom and beliefs.

Altogether, Creon's autocratic approach of governing led to restricted speech among the people.

Terror usually generates a negative response, but it can be utilized positively as well. Athena asserts that fear is important to keep peace, and therefore, it should not be completely eliminated. She states that through a justice system, "there will be no anarchy, nor the rule of tyranny," but still, one must not reject fear because "the mortal who has no fear can never know Justice" (Aes. *Fur.* 693-702). The jury represents a democratic way of judgement in society which can preserve peace and justice, while keeping the underlying idea of dread alive. To serve on the jury, she selects members who would "strive to return an honest verdict" and be "deliberate with judicial minds" (Aes. *Fur.* 487-89). This demonstrates that the people themselves valued justice and lawfulness and were willing to combat the ills of society for the greater good. Towards the end, Athena concludes, "They speak their minds, they have found the path of good," which is a direct contrast with the confined fear associated with the autocratic system of monarchy (Aes. *Fur.* 989). Altogether, these two contrasting ways of governing exhibit how intimidation is utilized to accomplish a unique response.

Although fear was a prevalent response, the citizens, nevertheless, kept a sense of hopeful dependency on their leaders. Before Oedipus's controversial truth was revealed, his "country call[ed] [him] its savior" (Soph.*OT.* 49-52). Furthermore, even though the people accepted Oedipus as their legitimate ruler, they emphasized that he needed to relieve the kingdom's plague which had tormented them because without the people's support, "a nation of no one can only be nothing" (Soph.*OT.* 54-57). This system of a cooperative monarchy displays a relationship of mutual trust and dependency between Oedipus and his Theban population. Similarly, despite the fact that Agamemnon was away from his kingdom for ten years due to the

Trojan War, the people still considered him the deserved leader. In the interim ten years, the kingdom of Mycenae suffered internal problems and even had anarchist characteristics due to unstable leadership. Agamemnon emerged as the victorious leader in the Trojan War, and upon his return, the residents gave him an extravagant welcome and declared that “he comes bringing light in the darkness” for everybody (Aes. *Ag.* 522-23). In times of extreme hardship, people have to keep their hopes alive and to do so, they depend on their ruler. Similarly, Theseus, who “too was once an exile and had to struggle to survive”, treated the aged Oedipus hospitably (Soph. *OC.* 564-69). Theseus’ gracious treatment towards his guests and his own citizens exhibits why the public reciprocated the respect toward him. Overall, a monarch elicited a positive response from the citizens as long as he or she maintained a positive image as a lender of support and assistance.

Contradictory to the supportive administration established by some leaders, other rulers were marked with the development of suspicion and revolt. After the unfortunate murders of Agamemnon and Cassandra through the conspired hands of Clytemnestra and Aegistheus, the chorus dismayingly clamors that “This is the first step towards tyranny,” and they would “rather die than be ruled by tyrants” (Aes. *Ag.* 1355-65). Public distrust was the response to the controversial overthrow of Agamemnon. Aeschylus presents Clytemnestra as a corrupt ruler to show how the sentiment of suspicion developed among the general public. Similarly, Antigone’s audacious act of civil disobedience against Creon symbolizes a revolutionary mindset. She accuses Creon of his authoritarian acts but cannot transform him because “a tyrant says and does what he pleases” (Soph. *An.* 506-08). Although it is Antigone who alone vocally resists Creon, Haemon asserts that even “the people of Thebes” backed her, “all of them” (Soph. *An.* 733). The people predominantly supported Antigone’s action which was an act of revolt by the general

public against its dictatorial ruler . All in all, dissension was a popular response of the discontented people against controversial actions of their respective leaders.

Altogether, the different types of political motives caused distinct public reactions. Sophocles, who was briefly involved politically, and Aeschylus, a reputed soldier himself, had external motives to embed political themes in their plays. The Peloponnesian Wars (431-404 B.C.E.) involved a constant political and military struggle between Athens, Sparta, and Thebes, which caused tremendous unrest among the people. Through the *Furies*, Aeschylus portrays that democracy with a judicial system is the best medium to deal with internal problems. Similarly, Sophocles presents both the extremes of monarchy, tyranny and cooperative rule. Mutual cooperation is displayed in a much more positive light by the people, and therefore exhibits how Sophocles undermines dictatorship and values a system closer to democracy. The underlying political theme was incorporated for the innocent audience who were victims amidst the ongoing political struggle. The questions of fear and justice, hope and reliance, and individualistic freedom, characteristics inherent to human nature, sparked among the citizens. As a whole, Aeschylus and Sophocles blended realistic themes in their plays to portray humanistic responses to the Greek audience.

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