

Aristophanes' Criticism of Egalitarianism: An Interpretation of *The Assembly of Women*

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I

Aristophanes' *Assembly of Women* is the literary companion to Plato's *Republic*. Both propose the communism of property, women and children. The proposals are an experiment in justice; they attempt to subordinate the private to the common good. Aristophanes' female legislator (Praxagora) is like Socrates in that she proposes the abolition of the family in the name of a more comprehensive unity. Through Praxagora's legislation Aristophanes conveys his thoughts about the wisdom of any attempt to destroy the private. *The Assembly of Women*, like *The Republic*, is a profound investigation into communism and therewith the limitations of politics.

While the subject of the play is communism, the play itself can be characterized as less than exuberant or even ugly.¹ It is ugly because its outcome is repulsive. The outcome is repulsive because it is manifestly unjust. The hags who deserve to be defeated are victorious, while the young lovers who deserve to be victorious are defeated. The offensive character of the play has forced interpreters to give reasons for its dissatisfying character. Some have attributed the ugly character of the play to the effects of old age and the decline of Athens on Aristophanes' thought.² But these are ad hoc explanations that fail to examine the relation between the subject of the play and its character. It is more reasonable, and will prove to be more fruitful, to explain the ugly character of the play in light of Aristophanes' thoughts on communism.

We, supporters of liberal democracy living after the fall of communism, might think that we are more qualified to pass judgment on communism than was Aristophanes because we have had the chance to see its practice rather than its possibility only. We might confirm to ourselves the opinion of our better judgment by the fact that Aristophanes does not dwell on the manifest economic problems connected with communism. Practice has shown that without the concern for the private there is no reason to work for the common good, that there is no political public-spiritedness that is not tainted by the concern with the private. Yet Aristophanes certainly knew that the creation of wealth was a great, if not insurmountable, problem for communism. He reveals his

awareness by placing doubts into the mouth of Bleepyros (a man who will only go to the assembly for pay) and by portraying a sensible citizen who will not give up his property but wants to enjoy public benefits.

Aristophanes was not unaware of the economic problems endemic to communism. He simply did not choose to emphasize the economic shortcomings because he did not believe them to be communism's worst failure. Aristophanes reveals that communism is a human failure, that the application of its principle leads not simply to poverty but to the destruction of what is noble and good about man. The play is ugly because it is meant to hold up a mirror to the ugliness of the communist vision of the right order of society.

The ugly character of the play is not the effect of destroying private property but of destroying the family. The sharing of women is of far greater importance to Aristophanes than the sharing of property. The community of women is founded on the following law: young men must first make love to ugly, old hags before making love to beautiful, young girls. Each girl is to be accompanied by a hag to ensure that the law is effectual. The law establishing the community of men is also ugly, but it is only an afterthought and is less strict. Old men are given the right to go first, but they must fight for position (694–709).³ Praxagora's sexual laws reveal the worst aspect of her regime.

These sexual laws are the consequence of her promise to make an equal distribution of happiness. She must ensure that the old and ugly enjoy the same satisfactions as the young and beautiful. The abolition of private property does not rectify the most painful inequalities, the personal ones. One's body cannot be made public; it is therefore a source of both the private and of inequality. There is no possible overcoming of the private nature of one's body. The scene that gives the play its character (the famous Hag Scene where three hags fight for a young man's sexual favor) is animated by the principle of equality, not the hatred of the private.

Those who are fortunate enough not to live in communist regimes, or what is left of them, should not be complacent about Aristophanes' critique of communism for it is also, or even more so, a critique of democracy. In fact it is more critical of our democratic project (to ensure that there is an equal distribution of happiness among human beings) than it is of the abolition of private property (the aspect of equality that we will not tolerate). Aristophanes believes that the egalitarianism about which we boast and plume our feathers—that no one is superior to anyone else with respect to the qualities conducive to happiness—is a greater threat to humanity than is common property. *The Assembly of Women* holds a mirror up to democracy and can therefore help us get a perspective on ourselves.

II

Anyone who reads *The Assembly of Women* cannot but be struck by the amazing difference between its daring and exciting beginning and its lackluster, if not repulsive, ending. The beginning is full of promise. Praxagora, through a

daring fraud, plans to replace rule by men with rule by women (or rather rule by herself, since she is the leader of the women and by far the most impressive of them). In contrast to the promising beginning, the play ends with a drunken maidservant calling happy the only man who has not partaken of the festival—the public satisfaction promised by Praxagora.

The disproportion between the beginning and the end reveals something of Aristophanes' pedagogy. He takes the claims and charms of communism seriously in order to allow it to reveal its true character. He first shows communism in its most favorable light. We see it at its inception, as the project of an extraordinary woman at a time of political corruption. We learn that Athens no longer reveres the ancient ways and no longer calls forth an instinctive patriotism. The urban population attends assembly only for money. Slandering and informing have become ways of life. Adultery and drunkenness are practices among the women and certainly not above the suspicion of their husbands. Furthermore, leaders and policies are constantly overturned by a corrupt populace that loves to be flattered and loves to see change for better or worse. In light of the corruption, even decay, Praxagora cannot but seem to promise a return to virtue. She promises a restoration of public health, which is the topic of discussion at the assembly.

Although the communism of property is not a return to the ancestral ways, it nonetheless appears to be public spirited. It appears to serve the common good because it is inclusive; it promises to relieve the poor of the suffering that comes from poverty. The relief of the poor appears especially just as Athens is not at war and therefore does not require the rich to contribute to a war effort. But the common good understood as common property is only a sham common good. The movement from vice to communism does not form a common object of devotion or a common attachment. The outlawing of private property simply promises that all will have their bodies cared for and that no one will have more than another. The abolition of private property is not a return to citizen virtue but an increase in democracy, a movement towards more equality. Athens will not be a harsh father demanding the sacrifice of comfort and life for the glory of the fatherland. She will be a kind and gentle mother providing each of her children with the necessities of life. Athens will be modeled after the economy of the family, not the virtue of the ancient city.⁴

Praxagora's sexual laws, unlike her property laws, do not even have the appearance of serving the common good. Aristophanes can show, without causing repulsion, a man who turns in his private property (728–876). He cannot show obedience to the sexual laws without causing disgust. Sex is not of the same nature as property. Sex is directed towards the beautiful and the pleasant, not towards the just and the useful. The pleasures of love cannot be shared by a community, and even the attempt to distribute them equally distorts their character. The sexual laws have as one of their clearly stated benefits, not justice, but the humiliation of the proud (631–34). They are laws of envy and resentment because they attempt to insult the beautiful while acknowledging that the

beautiful enjoy a happiness worthy of envy. Praxagora's sexual laws reveal the envy and resentment that can lie below the surface of claims to equality, especially in private matters.⁵

III

After Praxagora has set down as law the community of property, women and children she is written out of the play so that we may judge her regime on its own terms, unprejudiced by the splendor of its founder. The second part of the play is in turn divided into three distinct scenes. The first scene has for its subject the community of property; the second the community of women; and the third and final scene of the play the festive dinner that Praxagora promised each citizen. The section whose subject is the community of women (the Hag Scene) is by far the longest of the three, and its length is commensurate with its importance. We will discuss the Hag Scene in detail because it is the most important statement about Praxagora's democracy.

The scene opens with the first hag waiting for a man. She has plastered her face with cosmetics in order to look more beautiful, or less ugly, as the girl would have us believe. The hag has tried to make herself look beautiful in order to catch the eye of a man. She knows that men are attracted to beautiful women, and she also knows that her face is not likely to entice a man. Accordingly, she asks the Muses to help her sing a song so that she may catch the ear of a man. But why does the hag bother trying to attract a man when she knows that the man belonging to the girl with whom she is paired must go to bed with her by law? The hag seems ridiculous because she is trying to fool herself; she wants to believe that she could be the object of a man's desire. The girl to whom the hag is paired adds to her ridiculousness by singing against her as if she were a rival lover.

Despite Praxagora's attempt to make women equal, there are still claims to superiority. The hag claims to be wise, sexually experienced and loyal to her lovers. She contrasts her sexual experience and constancy with the girl's inexperience and possible inconstancy. The hag emphasizes her superiority in matters of love, since her claim to superiority is meant to convince a young man to choose her over the girl. But why does the hag bother giving reasons for why a young man should choose her when she knows that the law requires the girl's man to gratify her? The hag must argue for her superiority because she wants to be loved. Hence she does not immediately make her claim on the youth according to the law, as does the second hag. The fact that the first hag feels it necessary to justify herself also indicates that she thinks a young man would not be interested in her. The hag is conscious of the fact that she is interfering with the desires of the youth. She is also slightly uneasy about her interference; she feels that she does not have a right to the youth. The first hag does not think that the law gives her an unambiguous right to the girl's man.

The girl praises the beauty and bloom that accompany youth. Her praise of the advantages of youth is itself a claim to deserve praise. The girl thinks that the young and beautiful are naturally superior to the old and ugly. The girl does not argue for her superiority in matters of love because, unlike the hag, she is not concerned with justifying herself to a potential lover. In fact, she tells the hag not to begrudge the young their happiness, which indicates that she is defending the young against the old. The girl reminds the hag of her inferiority by contrasting the beauty and bloom characteristic of youth with the ugliness and decay characteristic of the old. The hag implicitly admits that the virtues of old age are not as important as the advantages of youth, since her only response to the girl is a curse. She curses the girl because she knows that the girl has a valid claim to superiority. The hag cannot hope to destroy the girl's beauty. Accordingly, the hag cannot hope that the girl does not get a man but must hope, by wishing her bad luck in bed, that she gets a man who cannot satisfy her sexual desires.

The girl is not bothered by the hag's curses and insults because the girl knows that insults cannot affect her beauty and that her beauty will not enable the hag to steal the youth. She possesses an inner confidence that comes from an awareness of one's own beauty and goodness. The girl then continues her attack on the hag by reminding her that death is always near the old. It seems that no law can relieve the threat of death which naturally threatens the old more than the young. The hag responds by saying that her old age will not distress the girl. The hag also tells the girl to stop singing. This response suggests that the girl has succeeded in wounding the hag. Her desire to limit the rivalry to things which will distress the girl is a desire to limit the rivalry to claims relevant to catching a particular man. The hag does not want her rivalry with the girl to be between the young and the old, as such. She does not want to discuss the justice of the law. The girl indicates to the hag that there can be no real rivalry between them as women competing for a man because the hag is so ugly. The girl is not as concerned with competing for the youth as she is with arguing that the young have natural advantages over the old. She thus suggests that Praxagora's sexual laws are unjust, since they give higher rights to the inferior.

When the girl's lover enters, he expresses his dissatisfaction with the new law. He sees no good reason for going to bed with a hag before going to bed with his girl. He then searches for the girl, hoping to find her alone. The girl has taken enough initiative to escape from the hag temporarily and calls to the youth. They then pray to Eros to bring them together. The lovers show their resistance to the law by trying to escape the duty it has placed on the youth. But when he goes to meet the girl, the hag meets him and reminds him that the new law is the obverse of the law by which he ate a free meal given to him by the city. The hag does not want to turn to the authority of the law outright but to the youth's sense of obligation, hoping that he will compromise his erotic appetite because the city satisfied his nonerotic appetite. But the youth does not

feel that the one thing has anything to do with the other; he does not feel obliged to compromise his erotic longings because the city has fed him.

When the hag persists, the youth attempts to argue that her privilege is just one side of the law, asserting that she must pay five per cent of her life in taxes before she can exercise her privilege. Since currency has been abolished, the youth cannot say that the hag owes taxes in the form of currency. The assertion that she owes taxes in the form of time is ridiculous; the youth had to make a sacrificial side of the hag's beneficial law because everything favors the hags. The hag ignores the youth's nonsense and says that she is taking him to bed. She no longer appeals to his sense of obligation but instead quotes the law. She does not attempt to explain the reasons behind the law nor does the passage she quotes give any reasons for it.

At one point the hag had pretended that the youth had come to see her and that she had been waiting for him specifically. The youth's resistance makes it impossible for her to pretend that she is loved or even desired; her seduction must be a tyrannical one. When the youth is about to be raped by the hag the girl enters. The hag tells her that the youth belongs to the hag. She does not quote the law but pretends that she has won the contest with the girl. Accordingly, the hag accuses the girl of envying her, for it would make no sense for the girl to envy the hag if the hag were just expecting sex, since the girl would be next. Because the hag resists resorting to the law and because she implies to the girl that she has won the contest, we can infer that the hag is uncomfortable with the truth of her present situation. The hag's uneasiness is not just a result of her failure to be loved; she thinks that she is not worthy of being loved. She is aware of the injustice of her desire and slightly ashamed of it. The hag is uneasy about the fact that she is an old and ugly woman using the force of the law in order to get a beautiful youth in bed. She is aware of the injustice of her desire and is slightly ashamed of it. This first hag shows some respect for the claims of the young beautiful.

The girl saves the youth by telling the hag that she is old enough to be the youth's mother. According to the girl, the law leads to incest and therefore is invalid. The hag is so horrified by the mere thought of committing incest that she stops raping the youth. Her horror reveals that shame before her own kin is more powerful in her than shame before the beautiful. It also reveals that the attachment to one's own has not been overcome. The private will only be overcome when horror and shame at incest are overcome, when man is re-animalized or, with respect to the pagan gods, when he is divinized.

When the second and third hags enter the scene, the girl does not give them the same argument concerning incest; she says nothing and does nothing. But why does she not tell the second hag that she is old enough to be the youth's mother? If the girl is silent because the hag is too old to be the youth's mother, then the girl would be showing respect for the law as long as the law does not lead to incest. Yet one might argue that the girl shows no respect for the law

because she tried to escape from the first hag and she called to the youth. But the girl's resistance occurred before claims were made by the authority of the law. The girl's failure to resist the second hag indicates that the girl is not one to break a law unless it leads to incest. Incest remains the limit of the law.

The second hag is not uneasy about taking the youth to bed. She unashamedly refers to the law as soon as she sees the girl with the youth. The second hag does not attempt to play the desired woman or give a list of virtues; she does not even quote the law. When the girl does not help the youth, he begins to describe how disgusting the second hag looks. She does not curse him or apologize for her looks; she asks him to join her in bed. The second hag cannot be shamed into thinking that an old, ugly woman should not be with a beautiful youth.

When the third hag enters, the youth thinks that she, like the girl, is going to save him from a hag. On discovering that she is also a hag, he calls upon Heracles, the slayer of monsters, to help him. He also describes how unattractive the third hag looks. One would think that the youth's descriptions of the hags would throw cold water on their sexual desires, since his descriptions of them are repulsive. But when the third hag enters she claims the youth on account of her age and ugliness. She is older and uglier than the second hag. The youth's descriptions of the hags actually strengthen their claims, since the ultimate claim on him is based on age and ugliness. The first hag did not want to mention her body or age; she referred to sexual experience, constancy, obligation and the law. The third hag does not see any problem in making her claim to the youth on the basis of her old age and ugliness.

The law, however, does not say that the older and uglier have the greater right to a young man. The law says that old women have rights over young girls. The law does not anticipate two old women battling for a young man. The third hag realizes that the law by which the second hag made her claim will not resolve their dispute. The third hag's claim to the youth on account of her age and ugliness is her interpretation of the principle which underlies the law. Praxagora's attempt to make the old and ugly equal to the young and beautiful forces her to give the old and ugly a higher right than the young and beautiful. The fact that the old and ugly need a higher right indicates that the old and ugly are naturally inferior to the young and beautiful; the higher right of the old and ugly is not thought of as the superiority of the old and ugly. The girl thinks that the higher right of the old and ugly denies the young and beautiful their happiness and proper respect; she shows no indication of thinking that the old and ugly may be superior by virtue of their higher right. The third hag's claim to be old and ugly is asserted with the same outspokenness as the girl's claim to be young and beautiful, but the third hag does not think she is naturally superior or more worthy of the youth because she is old and ugly. Her claim is shameless, not boastful or ridiculous.

Only when respect for youth and beauty is disregarded can the third hag

shamelessly claim the youth on account of her age and ugliness. The youth erroneously believes that he must gratify all old hags before making love to the girl. He makes this mistake because he understands the character of Praxagora's regime: all of the old and ugly come first.

We have seen that the rivalry between the girl and the first hag gives way to the rivalry between the second and third hags. The rivalry between the girl and the first hag involved claims to desert based on an understanding of merit or worthiness. They thought that a claim to deserve respect or to deserve some good had to be justified by an appeal to some praiseworthy quality or virtue. The third hag's claim to deserve the youth on account of her age and ugliness is not based on some positive quality or virtue; it is based on a lack of admired qualities. The second and third hags are tyrants who feel no need to justify their dominance or higher right by an appeal to beauty or virtue.

The youth ends the scene by saying that he wants the surviving hag to be his tombstone. He fears that his rape will end in his death. The girl had in part defended the young against the old by saying that death is closer to the old. Praxagora has succeeded in making the youth feel the threat of death just as much if not more than the old; she has denied him the pleasures of youth and thus, in a sense, she has denied him his youth.

Praxagora's regime does violence to nature. The distinction between the beauty of blossoming youth and the decay that foreshadows death is not obliterated, nor can it be. All that can be done to eradicate this most natural of inequalities is to make a law that denies the most elementary aspects of man's erotic nature. Eternal union and procreation with the beautiful are replaced by the sterility of bodily pleasure. The hags cannot be made beautiful, so the ascendancy of the beautiful must be denied. The suppression of the beautiful is the counterpart of teaching that human happiness is to be achieved on a subhuman or animal level. The hags can be considered happy only insofar as they are shameless, insofar as they enjoy legalized rape. *The Assembly of Women* is ugly because the victory of the hags is more repulsive than ridiculous. It is repulsive because we cannot share their shamelessness and because we cannot but pity the young lovers. Praxagora's attempt to make all happy has only redistributed and redefined happiness. Happiness must be understood in terms of the basest hedonism in order to bring about equality because all can enjoy bodily satisfactions; equality can be achieved only on the level of the body. The young lovers who were to be the envied example of human happiness are rendered miserable by the regime. Eros does not speak the language of law and hedonism.

IV

One might wonder why Aristophanes chose to show the community of women but not the community of men. The absence of the community of men is connected to the absence of a discussion of Praxagora's fate under the new

regime. Aristophanes allows us to solve the riddle of democracy by allowing us to put these two hidden parts together. Praxagora is married to Blepyros, an old man who, as his name “watcher” suggests, is not likely to make his young wife happy. He is not even aware that she wears perfume when she is amorous. Under the old democracy Praxagora was forced to take lovers in secrecy. The new regime coincides perfectly with her amorous interests; she can take lovers at her ease after having gone to bed, or even claiming to have gone to bed, with Blepyros. The amorous interests of Praxagora can even explain her abolition of private property. She says that the abolition of currency will help her put out of business the prostitutes, whom she hates because they receive the first embraces of young men. The new regime makes lawful the adulterous affairs that were once accompanied by fear and shame.

Contrary to our initial expectations, Praxagora does not bring about a return to virtue. Her regime is actually an advanced stage of virtue's decay, for there is no hope of virtue's restoration when there is no shame—when there is no awareness of virtue. Praxagora's regime can be characterized by legal permissiveness or, what amounts to the same thing in its democratic extremism, permissiveness regulated by the demands of equality. Far from restoring a feeling and idea of the common good, Praxagora establishes a form of political hedonism. Politics is reduced to the art of equally distributing bodily satisfactions.

One might attempt to excuse Praxagora because she suffered under the old democracy. She was married to an old man. Although she was constrained in the old regime she nonetheless found ways of getting around those constraints by having secret affairs. Our sympathy for her cannot go very far since her suffering was not without relief. Nor can we admire her, since for the sake of enjoying her pleasures in broad daylight, she subjected beautiful lovers to the constraint she felt in the old regime (perhaps a constraint imposed on her by nature). The lovers, like Praxagora, are forced to lie with those they do not love and even find to be repulsive. In Praxagora's regime the beautiful are made into prostitutes for the ugly. There was prostitution in the old democracy, but all of the young were not subject to it. In that democracy prostitution allowed the old to enjoy their desires without giving them a higher right while at the same time making them pay for their satisfactions. Furthermore, the prostitutes were not free women but slaves, already subjected to ignominy. The commerce between slaves and ugly citizens is certainly not noble, but it is better than what Praxagora institutes.

Unlike Praxagora, the hags would not be able to relieve themselves of their sufferings under the old regime. But nature, more than convention, has inflicted their suffering upon them. If they were pained by their privation under the old democracy, they at least remained decent and just by keeping their pains to themselves. They were more human before enjoying their legal license.

Praxagora justified the dissolution of the family by invoking the common good. She attempted to make the common good tangible by comparing it to the

family; the whole city is to be experienced as one large family. But from what we have discovered, we know that she does not believe what she says. She is the classic hypocrite who hides behind the morality of a higher justice in order to pursue her private pleasures. The tyranny of the hags is the public expression of Praxagora's new freedom, a freedom granted to her by her own decree.

Democracy first appeared to be just and philanthropic because its love of equality promised to make everyone happy. But like all regimes it is only the rule of a part for the sake of a part. Democracy rules not just for the sake of the poor but for the naturally ugly. Democracy cannot but be prejudicial to the better endowed who are used for the pleasure of the lesser. The law forcing sexual intercourse with the ugly is a powerful image of what Aristophanes believes to be the perversity of democracy.

The scene preceding the Hag Scene throws additional light on the character of law and of Praxagora's regime. In that scene there is a confrontation between Chremes (who without hope of reward or fear of punishment obeys the decree to turn in his property) and a "Citizen" who wants to keep his property. Chremes is the lawabiding man *ad absurdum*; he treats the law as an absolute. His fellow citizen thinks Chremes is mad because it makes no sense to give up what one has toiled for when there is good reason to believe that the law will be short lived. The law is meaningful only if it is obeyed, yet obedience to it depends on the will of the stronger who can overturn it. Chremes is forced to admit, if only by cursing, that the law does not have an unconditional dignity. But he is unable to discover the condition for the dignity of the law. The man who blindly obeys the philanthropic law is either a fool, a tyrant or both. He cannot defend his obedience and sacrifice with reasons, and he can only use force to make others obey.⁶ The dignity of the law depends on its ability to articulate the just order of things; it is whimsical decree or force without an articulation of the whole. The citizen, although selfish, justifies himself by saying that the gods teach man to take rather than to give.

The fact that the dignity of the law depends on its articulation of the just order of things means that the compassion which played a role in Praxagora's public policy cannot be the guiding principle of her regime. Compassion can be a tender feeling that moves the heart, but it does not justify force, and as Aristophanes makes clear (especially in the Hag Scene), force will always be a part of politics and will always require justification. It is therefore not surprising that in Praxagora's regime the former objects of pity become the new tyrants. They cannot be satisfied without being given higher rights. Force is needed to satisfy them because their suffering alone cannot bring others to relieve it.

The Hag Scene completes the scene preceding it insofar as the Hag Scene reveals the order of things which justifies democratic law. Egalitarianism suppresses the beautiful and therewith man's longing to overcome his mortality. It cannot recognize claims that transcend the concern with the preservation and pleasures of the body. Its shamelessness destroys the human.

The Hag Scene reveals an ugly combination of convention and hedonism that characterizes radical egalitarianism. The combination reflects the life of Praxagora, the founder of the new democracy. Her light is not the natural light of the sun but the sterile and manmade light of the lamp, which is the only witness to her secret amours (1–18). She fails to articulate a just order of things in which man can find his humanity because she gives higher rights to the ugly.

Just as the scene preceding the Hag Scene throws light on its ugliness, so the scene following it illuminates its ugly character. In this last scene a drunken servant calls happy the only man who has yet to enjoy the food and drink of the promised festival. He is called happy because he has something to look forward to. His satisfactions lie ahead of him; he is not satiated. The difference between those who satiate their senses and those who long for satisfactions helps us to understand the ugliness of the play. The young lovers who pray to Eros hope for eternal togetherness. Their eroticism is connected with their desire to unite with the beautiful which is the obverse of their repulsion at death and decay. Their hopes are in marked contrast to the hags who have nothing toward which to look forward except for death and sex. The young lovers have sentiments and longings that raise them above the beasts, that make them human. Praxagora banishes humanity from her regime; the satisfactions enjoyed between human beings differ from the pleasures of food and drink only in intensity. Love is drained of its procreative and divinatory powers; it is hardly distinguishable from drunkenness. In the name of equality Praxagora's regime contributes to the reanimalization of man, to oblivion of the eternal.

Praxagora's regime is repulsive, not ridiculous. It arouses disgust, indignation and pity rather than laughter. It is ugly because it completely severs justice and pleasure from the beautiful. The suppression of the beautiful is allied to the suppression of man's longing to overcome his mortality. Claims on behalf of the old and ugly to sexual preference can only be made if the horror of death is forgotten; intercourse can be immediate and intense only if one does not attempt to overcome one's paltry existence through love. Both nature and convention suffer under the guidance of Praxagora; the law and intercourse are cut off from an understanding of oneself in light of eternity. The interplay between law and nature in Praxagora's regime can be characterized by the force of tyranny and the sterility of meaningless pleasure.

We can deduce from the ugliness of Praxagora's regime that Aristophanes thinks man's humanity requires an awareness of eternity—an awareness of the human situation. Whether he thinks the eternal is animal or divine is unimportant for the present purposes. It suffices to recognize that an awareness of the human situation in light of the two eternities requires the proper mix of nature and convention. Convention and nature must be informed by an awareness of the mortality of the body, not just the preservation and pleasures of the body.

The required mix of nature and convention is found in the family. It cannot be forgotten that the critique of Praxagora's regime is a critique of the destruc-

tion of the family, and therefore an implicit defense of its existence despite its injustices to some. The family is the mating ground for the natural and the conventional. The private pleasures of lovers can actually lay a base for devotion to the city through the family. The lovers exhibit a combination of the natural and the divine; they pray to the god Eros to unite them. Furthermore, their love points towards the family. Procreation is the natural effect of intercourse and the most immediate way of overcoming one's mortality. Love and family connect human beings to one another in such a way as to require the support of the divine. The family is the aspect of the private which supports a world in which the law can find its reason for being. It brings together the body and the community through a concern with eternity. In the spirit of Aristotle we can say that he who is outside of the family or the associations built upon it is either a beast or a god. Every practical attempt to replace the family must dehumanize man. There is no political community independent of the family that is worthy of respect. We should not be surprised that Praxagora is more interested in avoiding the restraints of the family than in becoming part of a greater whole. The whole by which she legitimates adultery does not exist. In truth, she takes her bearings from the part of the whole that is body, that is subhuman.

Although there is a natural connection between love and family, Aristophanes is also aware that there is an obvious conflict between them, as is clear from the character of Praxagora's marriage. One might object to the fact that while Aristophanes underlined the injustice and ugliness of Praxagora's democracy, he did not underline the injustice and ugliness of the old democracy, which had forced marriages and denied intelligent women like Praxagora a vote, never mind a political voice. His emphasis should not be mistaken for the cleverness and passion of a vulgar partisan, who turns a blind eye to the faults of his beloved while pointing out all the deformities of those who speak ill of her. He is not dogmatic and defensive. Aristophanes' emphasis is that of a politically responsible wise man. He is wise because he thinks through the idealistic and opportunistic attempt to create the perfectly just society. He is politically responsible because he condemns it by indulging it; he allows it to reveal itself for what it is. He has no need for accusations and apologies.

At the end of the play the chorus draws the distinction between judges who simply laugh and judges who think. Aristophanes claims to satisfy both. At its height his comedy is a feast for the mind. But even the obscenities that make us laugh are not shameless; they would not cause laughter if they were not accompanied by an awareness of decency. Although the pleasures of understanding and laughter are not equal to one another, they are both more human than the pleasures of Praxagora's democracy. Her democracy can be characterized by democratic fanaticism and democratic decay. Its justice and pleasures do not accompany laughter because they are tyrannical and shameless rather than boastful and ridiculous. Nor do they accompany thought because they are doc-

trinaire and animal rather than moral and human. Laughter and thought are outside of Praxagora's democracy because the human is foreign to it. Unlike Praxagora, Aristophanes does not allow his reader to forget eternity. By giving the hags the victory over the lovers, he brings before us death and the longing to overcome it. His picture is not simply repulsive. The victory of the hags is comical because it is an impossible fantasy. The young, especially young men, would rebel against the old before being subjected to their sexual desires. In the strength of youth there is a natural force on behalf of beauty.

But the repulsiveness of the hags' victory is moderated by more than its physical impossibility. It is also moderated by the fact that it is the fulfillment of a political project. Their victory reveals the disproportion between the promises of democracy and its reality. The disproportion is sobering and is a subject for reflection. The victory of the hags is the victory of death over all human hopes. It is a lesson about what man can hope for by pursuing justice to the neglect of the moral order. One cannot forget that Praxagora's project requires the transgression of sacred laws. Aristophanes does not allow idealism, resentment and physical pleasure to blind him to death. His art transcends Praxagora's by preserving an awareness of the human alternatives and therewith the human.

The Assembly of Women is more critical of democratic extremism than it is of communism. Aristophanes shows the ugly character of egalitarianism in its humorless moralism fueled by resentment and its sterile hedonism that knows no pleasures beyond those of the immediate senses. These ugly sisters belong together because they are born of the same mother: equality can only be achieved by affirming as absolute the satisfactions that every man, woman and child can enjoy regardless of intelligence, education, talent, beauty or even effort. Egalitarianism has as its end the reanimalization of man, the denial of anything that transcends the preservation and the pleasures of the body. By thinking through the underlying principle of democracy to its extreme but logical conclusion, Aristophanes warns democracy against its worst temptations.

NOTES

1. The characterization of the play as less than exuberant or even as ugly is shared by Gilbert Murray, Leo Strauss and Moses Hadas.

2. This is the opinion of Gilbert Murray in *Aristophanes: A Study*, p.181. A similar opinion can be found in the introduction of the Loeb Classical Library edition, V.III, p.246.

3. The line references are standard to most Greek editions and translations.

4. The reduction of the political entity to an economic entity is even evident in the women's claim to rule (214–40). The substitution of the economic for the political is consistent with the replacement of the human with the subhuman. I have not discussed the relation between the character of the play and the fact that Praxagora is a female. A discussion of this aspect of the play can be found in Leo Strauss' *Socrates and Aristophanes*, pp.281–82.

5. It must be noted that Plato also attempted to bring man's sexual nature into line with the demands of the common good. But Plato did not attempt to politicize sex by giving out equal

rations. Plato takes communism further than Aristophanes by subordinating sexual desire to the good order of the city. He can do this because he is willing, at least for argument's sake, to assume that the city is analogous to the soul. Plato is thereby capable of denying man a happiness independent of the city and of affirming the primacy of hierarchy. When nature finally does come into conflict with the city, it is the mind rather than the body that rebels. The city is ugly, not because it frustrates young lovers, but because it forces the philosopher to be concerned with a particular city at a particular time. Plato completes *The Assembly of Women* by showing the city in light of the divine in man rather than in light of the animal in man. For a more developed comparison between *The Republic* and *The Assembly of Women* see Allan Bloom, *Giants and Dwarfs*, pp.170–76.

6. That force cannot be avoided is the meaning of the exchanges at (795–805) and (866–74).

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