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Socrates and the Crisis of Modern Politics

K Afsal^{1,*}, T P Aswin²

¹Lecturer, Political Science, Government Arts and Science College, Thrithala, 679534, Kerala, India

²Research Scholar, Department of Political science, University of Kerala, Kariavattom Campus, Thiruvananthapuram, 695581, Kerala, India

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* Corresponding author.

K Afsal

kizhattilafsal@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the crisis of modern politics, encompassing its various manifestations, such as the loss of autonomy for the political, depoliticisation, and the erosion of political authority. It also explores Socrates as a potential source to address these issues, although it does not necessarily provide a definitive solution. The article tries to show that the Socratic method has a definite advantage in providing ontological stability to the concept of politics. It gives a clear justification for political authority, while his dialectics enables the formulation of a political praxis that accommodates plurality without dissolving into disintegration. Socratic teleology, on the other hand, is regarded as essential in bringing back the normative foundations of politics. His critique of democracy, especially regarding the pathologies of the Athenian system, has incredible validity in contemporary scenarios, reaffirming the need for closer attention to Socrates. We are once again compelled to grapple with the questions of 'what is political?' and 'who should rule?' that Socrates endeavoured to answer.

Keywords: Virtue; Depoliticisation; Dialectic; Citizen; Spectacle

INTRODUCTION

There's a troubling gap in modern democracies between how they're supposed to work and how they actually work. On paper, democratic systems have never been more widespread, yet in practice, people are becoming increasingly disillusioned with them. We see this not just in dwindling voter turnout worldwide, but in how democratic ideals are being eroded by populist strongmen and hollowed-out institutions¹. Politics itself seems to be losing its meaning - reduced to empty spectacle, managed by technocrats, or treated as just another marketplace. This raises urgent questions: What should politics really be about? How do we reclaim its purpose at a time when it feels so broken?

While theorists have proposed various solutions - from multicultural coexistence to more deliberative approaches - we've largely forgotten a fundamental insight from Socrates:

that at its best, politics should be about collective self-discovery and ethical growth through dialogue. It is not suggested to simply turn back the clock to ancient Athens, but rather that we rediscover Socrates' radical view of politics as a space where citizens come together to question, challenge and truth-seek - not just to score points or push agendas.²

Socrates' enduring relevance becomes clear when juxtaposed with contemporary critics of our depoliticised age. Like Arendt's (1970)³ warnings about reducing governance to administration, Brown's (2015)⁴ analysis of market logic colonising public life, or Rancière's (2016)⁵ critique of faux democracy, Socrates exposes what we've lost: politics as the art of collective self-questioning. His model of philosophical dialogue, oriented toward truth rather than victory, challenges the empty performance of modern political theatre. In



a time of deepening cynicism, this Socratic vision reminds us that authentic politics requires creating spaces where citizens can fundamentally reexamine their shared existence. That radical commitment to truth telling may be our only path through contemporary disillusionment.

THE CRISIS OF THE POLITICAL

We find ourselves in a peculiar historical moment where politics has been hollowed out, not just institutionally, but existentially. To the modern subject, the political realm feels increasingly spectral, a distant abstraction rather than a lived dimension of collective life. Our primary identities are now economic, producers and consumers first, citizens only incidentally, a shift that mirrors the total colonisation of politics by market logic. The very notion of an autonomous political good has atrophied; the state is no longer imagined as a site of ethical fulfilment or emancipation, but merely as an administrative apparatus for managing populations. In this reduction of politics to governmentality, what Foucault (1975)⁶ termed "biopolitics" reaches its apotheosis: human life is stripped to its bare biological and economic functions, devoid of higher purpose. We inhabit a paradox, surrounded by democratic institutions yet governed by a post-political rationality that renders us, in effect, Nietzsche's last men: passive, cynical, and trapped in the eternal recurrence of the same.⁷

Wendy Brown's analysis reveals the profound tragedy of our political moment: we have not merely witnessed the erosion of democratic practice, but the collapse of our very capacity to imagine alternatives. Neoliberalism has systematically reconfigured politics, transforming what was once the arena for collective self-determination into yet another domain governed by market rationality. This represents more than policy shifts, it constitutes a fundamental reworking of human subjectivity itself, replacing the engaged citizen with the self-interested consumer⁴. Thatcher's infamous declaration that "society doesn't exist" crystallises this worldview, reducing all social bonds to transactional logic and extinguishing the notion of shared public purpose⁸. The bitter irony lies in the spectacle of contemporary politics as political theatre becomes more bombastic, and genuine democratic participation atrophies. Citizens are reduced to passive spectators of manufactured conflicts, while the actual mechanisms of power remain unchallenged. Brown's critique exposes how we have lost not just particular political battles, but the very language through which we might articulate a different vision of collective life. The most devastating consequence is not simply that politics has been hollowed out, but that we can no longer conceive of it being otherwise—a paralysis of political imagination that may prove more damaging than any institutional crisis⁹. The media spectacle of modern politics serves only to distract from this hollowing out of genuine democratic possibility. Brown's analysis reveals the depth of our predicament - we

haven't just lost particular political battles but are losing the very capacity to imagine politics as anything other than economics by other means. In this light, reclaiming democracy requires more than policy reforms; it demands nothing less than reimagining what it means to be political beings.

Hannah Arendt's profound insight reveals how modernity has inverted the classical understanding of politics, transforming what was once the noble realm of collective freedom into an extension of private household management. Where ancient Greeks celebrated the public sphere as the space where equals could act together in freedom, we now witness the triumph of what Arendt called "animal laborans" over "homo politicus" - the reduction of political life to mere biological and economic concerns¹⁰. This seismic shift has birthed a mass society, where atomised individuals, stripped of authentic political agency, exist as disconnected particles rather than engaged citizens. The tragic consequence is what Arendt described as the loss of that vital "world between us" - the shared space that once gathered people together in meaningful action (³, pp. 24–47). In its place, we find only the endless production and consumption of goods, managed by bureaucratic experts who create the illusion of governance while producing what Arendt chillingly termed "the rule of nobody." This condition represents more than political crisis; it signals the near-total disappearance of politics as the ancient world understood it - not as administration of life's necessities, but as the highest expression of human freedom and dignity (¹¹, pp. 77–110). The modern paradox emerges clearly: we have more political systems than ever before, yet less authentic political life.

Jacques Rancière provides a powerful lens for understanding contemporary political challenges through his distinction between the established social order and authentic political action. The first term refers to society's invisible framework that assigns roles, controls visibility, and defines legitimate discourse. True politics emerges when this framework fractures, when marginalised groups suddenly become visible and claim their right to participate as equals⁵. These explosive moments, where excluded voices demand recognition, represent genuine political action that disrupts the smooth functioning of power disguised as consensus. Rancière's analysis reveals that our political crisis springs not from disorder, but from an ossified social structure that actively prevents transformative moments from emerging. Contemporary political philosophy exacerbates this condition by pursuing illusory perfect systems which, in their very design, generate new exclusions rather than fostering spaces for genuine dissent and reconfiguration. This impasse directs us to Socrates' enduring example, not as an antique idealisation but as a living methodology. His practice of relentless interrogation and disruption of received wisdom demonstrates politics at its most vital:



not as technical governance or theatrical display, but as the courageous collective examination of shared existence. While our historical circumstances differ markedly from classical Athens, the Socratic commitment to truth-seeking through dialectic remains profoundly relevant. It offers both a critique of our current political paralysis and a way forward—insisting that authentic politics must create arenas where fundamental assumptions can be challenged, where power submits to reasoned examination, and where citizens emerge transformed through the risky work of public dialogue. In an era of bureaucratic management and performative politics, this Socratic vision reminds us that the health of any polity depends on its capacity to sustain such spaces of genuine contestation and collective self-questioning. His example suggests that renewing politics today requires not better systems, but citizens willing to question and reinvent what politics means, just as he did through his public philosophical practice.

SOCRATES AND CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL CRISIS

The political crisis we face today goes beyond the failures of specific governments or ideologies. It represents a fundamental breakdown in how we understand politics as a distinct human endeavor. While commentators often focus on surface-level problems like populism, misinformation, or bureaucratic overreach, they rarely examine the deeper philosophical emptiness at the heart of modern political life. This is where Socrates becomes profoundly relevant. He was among the first to recognise politics not as some lofty ideal separate from daily life, but as the very ground where collective reasoning and power meet in practice¹². His crucial insight was that when this space becomes poisoned by rigid dogma or hollow rhetoric, it deteriorates into simple domination. In our current age, where politics oscillates between dry administration and tribal performance, the Socratic method offers something more valuable than ready-made solutions. It provides a way to maintain politics as that challenging yet essential work of reasoning together across our differences.

Socrates understood politics as springing from our essential humanity, that distinctive capacity for ethical reasoning which transforms mere coexistence into shared pursuit of the good. Where modern thought often separates power from morality, his vision insisted politics must remain rooted in collective moral inquiry. This conception emerged from recognising how human communities transcend bare necessity through reasoned dialogue about how to live well together. For Socrates, authentic political life was neither abstract speculation nor ruthless power struggle, but the practical work of building communities where truth and virtue might flourish through ongoing conversation among citizens¹³. His enduring insight was that politics withers when divorced from this ethical foundation. Where

contemporary thought often reduces politics to instrumental power struggles, Socratic understanding preserves its deeper purpose: the transformation of bare existence into a shared moral enterprise¹⁴.

Socrates presents a profound challenge to modern political thought precisely because he insists on the inseparability of politics and ethics, a position that appears almost alien in our post-Machiavellian world. Where contemporary political philosophy since the Renaissance has sought to ground governance in immanent calculations of power or procedural legitimacy, Socratic understanding preserves the ancient view of politics as the collective pursuit of the good life¹⁵. The liberal contractarian tradition, from Hobbes to Locke, attempted to solve the problem of order through fictional social contracts that simultaneously empowered and constrained political authority, creating governments accountable yet distant from the demos. This framework, while securing individual rights, produced what Carl Schmitt (2014)¹⁶ would later identify as liberalism's fatal flaw—the evacuation of substantive authority from political life. Bereft of traditional foundations like divine mandate or natural law, yet unable to generate new forms of legitimate authority, modern polities oscillate between hollow proceduralism and populist eruptions¹⁷. The neoliberal age has exacerbated this crisis by replacing political judgment with market rationality, reducing the state to a managerial shell while surrendering actual governance to spectral market forces¹⁸. What emerges is a disturbing paradox: we have constructed political systems that protect individual autonomy yet lack the moral resources to sustain meaningful collective action or address substantive questions of justice. The contemporary crisis of authority manifests most visibly when these systems confront challenges they cannot process through their neutral procedures; moments when the emperor's lack of clothes becomes undeniable. In this light, Socrates' insistence that politics must answer to ethical reason rather than mere power calculus appears not as antiquated idealism, but as a vital corrective to our impoverished political imagination. His example reminds us that sustainable political communities require more than clever institutional designs—they demand shared moral horizons that contemporary liberalism, in its prudent avoidance of substantive questions about the good, has proven unable to provide. The market's invisible hand makes for a poor substitute for the visible authority that genuine political community requires¹⁹.

Socrates presents us with an apparent paradox that reveals the depth of his political thought. While maintaining profound respect for Athenian laws and civic obedience, his philosophical practice embodied a constant questioning of established norms. This tension resolves when we recognise that Socrates' allegiance was not to authority as such, but to the ethical ideals that legitimate authority should represent. His approach constituted neither blind



submission nor radical rejection, but what might be called immanent critique, within the city's own professed values to expose contradictions between its ideals and practices²⁰. The Socratic method shares certain affinities with contemporary theories of dissensus and agonistic democracy, particularly in its refusal of final answers and its embrace of ongoing dialogue. Yet crucial differences emerge. Where thinkers like Mouffe (1985)²¹ see democracy as an endless contest between irreconcilable positions, Socrates maintained that political debate must be oriented toward discovering shared truths about the good life. His dialogues were not simply clashes of opinion, but collective searches for ethical understanding grounded in reason. This teleological dimension, the belief that political discourse should aim at genuine human flourishing, prevents the endless circling of pure agonism while still preserving critical space for dissent²². The modern crisis of authority stems in part from abandoning this Socratic insight: that political communities require not just procedures for managing conflict, but shared commitments to truth-seeking that give meaning to those procedures. Without such substantive orientation, democratic politics risks becoming either the imposition of hegemony disguised as consensus or the paralysis of perpetual disagreement²³. Socrates reminds us that authority becomes legitimate precisely when it emerges from and serves this collective ethical reasoning, not as a final dogma, but as the living practice of citizens committed to examining life's most important questions together²⁴. The Athenians' enduring relevance lies in showing how we might honor laws while still questioning them, participate in communities while still challenging them, and pursue truth while recognising its elusiveness, the difficult but necessary balancing acts that sustain genuine political life²⁵.

The potency of Socratic position lies in his teleological understanding of political action. Socratic thought only achieves its coherence in the context of teleos, a way of understanding process in terms of its end or purpose. Teleology is particularly repulsive to modern understanding as it signifies a metaphysical baggage that modernity has strived to displace. As the ethical core of politics has been displaced, the study of politics has shifted towards the positivist enumeration of the political process, leaving out the normative discourse completely astray. Alasdair MacIntyre (2014)¹⁹ has famously vindicated that the absence of teleological understanding has made modern ethical disputes indeterminable. Since each contender have entirely different view on the idea of life or what a human being is, the resulting moral dilemma is impossible to solve. Teleos is also the factor that enables us to achieve excellence in any vocation. An end or purpose makes us aware of how much we have progressed towards it, revealing us what is lacking and what needs to be improved. A value neutral idea of politics lacks this fundamental quality. The result will be the eventual doom of politics into management. The

professionalisation of politics has led to its formalisation and bureaucratisation, leaving no scope for treating politics as a productive engagement. Since people are out of the picture, what we have is a condition aptly predicted by Schumpeter (1942)²⁶ as a competition between elites for power. It's an era of political entrepreneurs mobilising people based on different issues and trying to win their support and acceptance. Like the sophists who stressed rhetoric and speech as essential political skills, the art of persuasion continues to dominate contemporary politics. Rather than speech, visual images are the sites of new propaganda. Thus, advertising, event management, and appearance all become factors in determining political outcome. In such a society of spectacle where politics is just one style or form of spectacle, the transformative potential of a political act is irretrievably lost.

Socratic dialogue provides a powerful alternative to ordinary political debate. It turns arguments into a shared search for truth. Modern debate usually starts with fixed opinions and tries to win. The Socratic method, however, begins with admitting what we do not know. It asks people to build understanding together. Today, political talk is often left to experts and treated as a show, not a regular part of being a citizen. We let professional commentators do the work of public thinking for us. This professionalization points to a larger problem. Liberal tolerance can become just living side by side without real conversation. It becomes a polite agreement to disagree that stops any real change. The Socratic way is different. It requires people to put their own beliefs at risk. It sees political exchange not as a performance, but as an ethical act that changes everyone involved²⁷. True dialogue does not create winners and losers. Instead, it creates new kinds of citizens. Their connection to truth and community is remade through the risky work of reasoning together. This idea challenges our limited view of politics. It argues that real democracy needs more than just voting and laws. It needs citizens who are willing to be changed by the difficult and vulnerable work of engaging with those they disagree with. The success of a discussion should not be measured by who won, but by how much every person was changed by the experience.

CONCLUSION

The crisis of modern politics is not merely a failure of institutions or procedures, but a deeper loss of meaning about what it means to act politically. We are witnessing a hollowing out of the political sphere, a process identified by various thinkers. Neoliberalism has reframed the citizen as a consumer and reduced governance to economic management. Political theorists like Hannah Arendt warned against this reduction of politics to mere administration, where technical problem-solving replaces genuine debate about the good life. Similarly, post-foundationalist thought highlights how a drive for consensus can silence dissent and



exclude marginalized voices. These critiques all converge on the same troubling reality: politics has been stripped of its ethical substance and its capacity for collective world-building.

In this void, the ancient figure of Socrates re-emerges as an indispensable guide. His philosophy offers precisely the resources our impoverished political imagination lacks. He insisted that politics and ethics are inseparable, that public life must be grounded in a shared pursuit of virtue and truth. His dialectical method, the rigorous, collaborative testing of ideas through dialogue, provides a powerful alternative to the partisan shouting matches and soundbite-driven discourse that dominate today. Furthermore, his entire project was teleological, meaning it was oriented toward the ultimate goal of human flourishing, or eudaimonia. This stands in stark contrast to the aimless, short-term calculus that often characterizes modern governance.

A Socratic approach to politics demonstrates that legitimate authority cannot be grounded in technical expertise alone, nor can it be sustained by empty theatrical performance. True authority must be justified through reasoned dialogue that is oriented toward a common understanding of the good. His example is also crucial for our pluralistic societies. It shows how a diversity of viewpoints can be engaged seriously and accommodated without dissolving into a "anything goes" relativism. We can disagree fundamentally yet remain committed to a shared process of questioning, a process that itself constitutes a meaningful political community. This vision anchors political life in a collective search for meaning, rescuing it from being reduced to what critics call biopolitical management, the mere administration of populations, or the cold logic of the market.

In reclaiming this Socratic vision, we are not advocating for a nostalgic return to antiquity. We are recovering a living and urgent reminder of politics' true potential. Authentic political life begins whenever citizens find the courage to risk their own preconceptions in dialogue with others. It is reignited when we demand that power reorient itself toward ethical truth, and when we, as a community, rediscover the transformative power of collective self-questioning. Socrates does not give us a blueprint for a perfect state, but he reacquaints us with the fundamental activity that creates and sustains a vibrant democratic life: the difficult, essential, and ongoing conversation about how we ought to live together.

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