

THE INSTITUTE FOR ANACYCLOSIS

EXCERPT FROM
COMMON SENSE
BY THOMAS PAINE

1776 A.D.

Note: This text concisely but subtly illustrates the accretive nature of Anacyclosis, and demonstrates its operation in the English Constitution, c. 1776. Paine describes the English Constitution as a composite mixture of “monarchical tyranny” plus “aristocratical tyranny” plus “new republican materials”. Expressed in terms of the Greek typology, “monarchical tyranny” would be called simply “tyranny” and “aristocratical tyranny” would be called “oligarchy”. But Paine’s terms are important not only for their equivalence to Greek archetypes; they also imply degeneration, corruption from the non-tyrannical form of monarchy and aristocracy. Thus Paine’s first two elements of the English Constitution can be divided into four successive stages of political evolution: monarchy and tyranny, and aristocracy and oligarchy. Paine’s third element – “new republican materials in the persons of the commons” – represents the popular/nascent democratic element. Projected against even an elementary understanding of the content and sequence of English history, Paine’s short sketch of the English Constitution is reconciled to almost the entire sequence of Anacyclosis. Finally, though he does not expressly attack Polybius, Paine attacks the notion that the English Constitution represents the Polybian mixed constitution. Some objections could be made to his rationale in that regard, but that is not our focus here.

1. Of the origin and design of government in general, with concise remarks on the English Constitution.

... I know it is difficult to get over local or long standing prejudices, yet if we will suffer ourselves to examine the component parts of the English constitution, we shall find them to be the base remains of two ancient tyrannies, compounded with some new republican materials.

FIRST - The remains of monarchial tyranny in the person of the king.

SECONDLY - The remains of aristocratical tyranny in the persons of the peers.

THIRDLY - The new republican materials in the persons of the commons, on whose virtue depends the freedom of England.

... To say that the constitution of England is a UNION of three powers reciprocally CHECKING each other, is farcical, either the words have no meaning, or they are flat contradictions. To say that the commons is a check upon the king, presupposes two things:

FIRST - That the king is not to be trusted without being looked after, or in other words, that a thirst for absolute power is the natural disease of monarchy.

SECONDLY - That the commons, by being appointed for that purpose, are either wiser or more worthy of confidence than the crown.

But as the same constitution which gives the commons a power to check the king by withholding the supplies, gives afterwards the king a power to check the commons, by empowering him to reject their other bills; it again supposes that the king is wiser than those whom it has already supposed to be wiser than him. A mere absurdity!

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