

THE INSTITUTE FOR ANACYCLOSIS

EXCERPT FROM
DEFENCE OF THE CONSTITUTIONS OF THE UNITED STATES
BY JOHN ADAMS

1787 A.D.

Note: This text closely tracks Polybius' original description of Anacyclosis.

Letter XXXI. Ancient Republics, and Opinions of Philosophers.

My dear Sir,

The generation and corruption of governments, which may in other words be called the progress and course of human passions in society, are subjects which have engaged the attention of the greatest writers; and whether the essays they have left us were copied from history, or wrought out of their own conjectures and reasonings, they are very much to our purpose, to shew the utility and necessity of different *orders* of men, and of an *equilibrium* of powers and privileges. They demonstrate the corruptibility of every species of simple government, by which I mean a power without a check, whether in one, a few, or many. It might be sufficient to shew this tendency in simple democracy alone, for such is the government of one assembly, whether of the people collectively or representatively: but as the generation and corruption of all kinds of government have a similitude with one another, and proceed from the same qualities in human nature, it will throw the more light upon our subject, the more particularly we examine it. I shall confine myself chiefly to Plato, Polybius, and your namesake Sir Thomas Smith.

Polybius thinks it manifest, both from reason and experience, that the best form of government is not simple, but compounded, because of the tendency of each of the simple forms to degenerate; even democracy, in which it is an established custom to worship the gods, honour their parents, respect the elders, and *obey the laws*, has a strong tendency to change into a government where the multitude have a power of doing whatever they desire, and where insolence and contempt of parents, elders, gods, and laws, soon succeed.

From whence do governments originally spring? From the weakness of men, and the consequent necessity to associate, and he who excels in strength, and courage, gains the command and authority over the rest; as among inferior animals, who are not influenced by opinion, the strongest are, by common consent, allowed to be masters. This is monarchy. But when the nation, by living together, acquires some tincture of honour and justice, gratitude, duty, and their opposites, and the monarch countenances these moral qualities, and treats every one according to his merit, they are no longer afraid of violence, but submit to him, and unite in supporting his government, although he may again become weak and advanced in years. By this means a monarch insensibly becomes a king, that is, when the power is transferred from courage and strength to reason. This is the origin of true *kingly government* for the people preserve the command, not only to them, but to their descendants, being persuaded, that those who have received their birth and education from such men will resemble them in their principles. But if they are dissatisfied with their descendants, they then choose magistrates and kings, with regard only to superior sense and reason, and not to strength and courage; having by experience been convinced of the difference between them. Those who were once chosen and invested with the royal dignity, grew old in the enjoyment of it, possessed themselves of a territory, surrounded it with walls, and fortified advantageous posts: thus consulting the security of their subjects, and supplying them with plenty of

provisions, differing little in their clothes or tables from the people with whom they passed their lives, they continued blameless and unenvied. But their posterity, succeeding to the government by right of inheritance, and finding every thing provided for security and support, they were led by superfluity to indulge their appetites, and to imagine that it became princes to appear in a different dress, to eat in a more luxurious manner, and enjoy, without contradiction, the forbidden pleasures of love. The first produced envy, the other resentment and hatred. By which means kingly government degenerated into tyranny.

At the same time a foundation was laid, and a conspiracy formed, for the destruction of those who exercised it; the accomplices of which were not men of inferior rank, but persons of the most generous, exalted, and enterprising spirit; for such men can least bear the insolence of those in power. The people, having these to lead them, and uniting against their rulers, kingly government and monarchy were extirpated, and aristocracy began to be established, for the people, as an immediate acknowledgment to those who had destroyed monarchy, chose these leaders for their governors, and left all their concerns to them.

These, at first, preferred the advantage of the public to all other considerations, and administered all affairs, both public and private, with care and vigilance. But their sons having succeeded them in the same power, unacquainted with evils, strangers to civil equality and liberty, educated from their infancy in the splendor of the power and dignities of their parents, some giving themselves up to avarice, others to intemperance, and others to the abuse of women, by this behaviour changed *the aristocracy into an oligarchy*.

Their catastrophe became the same with that of the *tyrants*; for if any person, observing the general envy and hatred which these rulers have incurred, has the courage to say or do any thing against them, he finds the whole body of the people inspired with the same passions they were before possessed with against the tyrant, and ready to assist him. Thereupon they put some of them to death, and banish others; but dare not, after that, appoint a king to govern them, being still afraid of the injustice of the first; neither dare they entrust the government with any number of men, having still before their eyes the errors which those had before committed: so that having no hope, but in themselves, they convert the government from an *oligarchy to a democracy*, and take upon themselves the care and charge of public affairs.

And as long as any are living, who felt the power and dominion of the *few*, they acquiesce under the present establishment, and look upon equality and liberty as the greatest of blessings. But when a new race of men grows up, these, no longer regarding equality and liberty, from being accustomed to them, aim at a greater share of power than the rest, particularly those of the greatest fortunes, who, grown now ambitious, and being unable to obtain the power they aim at by their own merit, dissipate their wealth, by alluring and corrupting the people by every method; and when, to serve their wild ambition, they have once taught them to receive bribes and entertainments, from that moment the democracy is at an end, and changes to force and violence. For the people, accustomed to live at the expence of others, and to place their hopes of a support in the fortunes of their neighbours, if headed by a man of a great and enterprising spirit, will then have recourse to violence, and getting together, will murder, banish, and divide among themselves the lands of their adversaries, till, grown wild with rage, they again find a master and a monarch.

This is the rotation of governments, and this the order of nature, by which they are changed, transformed, and return to the same point of the circle.

Lycurgus observing that all this was founded on necessity and the laws of nature, concluded, that every form of government that is simple, by soon degenerating into that vice that is allied to it, and naturally attends it, must be unstable. For as rust is the natural bane of iron, and worms of wood, by which they are lured to be destroyed, so there is a certain vice implanted by the hand of nature in every simple form of

government, and by her ordained to accompany it. The vice of kingly government is monarchy; that of aristocracy, oligarchy; and of democracy, *rage and violence*; into which all of them, in process or time, must necessarily degenerate. To avoid which Lycurgus united in one all the advantages of the best governments, to the end that no branch of it, by swelling beyond its bounds, might degenerate into the vice that is congenial to it, and that, while each was mutually acted upon by *opposite powers*, no one part might outweigh the rest. The Romans arrived at the same end by the same means.

Polybius, you perceive, my dear Sir, is more charitable in his representation of human nature than Hobbes, Mandeville, Rochefoucault, Machiavel, Beccaria, Rousseau, De Lolme, or even than our friend Dr. Price. He candidly supposes that the first kingly government will be wisely and honestly administered, during the life of the father of his people; that the first aristocracy will be conducted with caution and moderation, by the band of patriots to whom is due the glory of the expulsion of the tyrant; and that the people, for a generation at least, who have deposed the oligarchy, will behave with decorum. But perhaps it might be more exactly true and natural to say, that the king, the aristocracy, and the people, as soon as ever they felt themselves secure in the possession of their power, would begin to abuse it. In Mr. Turgot's single assembly, those who should think themselves most distinguished by blood and education, as well as fortune, would be most ambitious; and if they found an apparition among their constituents to their elections, would immediately have recourse to entertainments, secret intrigues, and every popular art, and even to bribes, to increase their parties. This would oblige their competitors, though they might be infinitely better men, either to give up their pretensions, or to imitate these dangerous practices. There is a natural and unchangeable inconvenience in all popular elections. There are always competitions, and the candidates have often merits nearly equal. The virtuous and independent electors are often divided: this naturally causes too much attention to the most profligate and unprincipled, who will sell or give away their votes for other considerations than wisdom and virtue. So that he who has the deepest purse, or the fewest scruples about using it, will generally prevail.

It is from the natural aristocracy in a single assembly that the first danger is to be apprehended in the present state of manners in America; and with a balance of landed property in the hands of the people, so decided in their favour, the progress to degeneracy, corruption, rage, and violence, might not be very rapid; nevertheless it would begin with the first elections, and grow faster or slower every year. Rage and violence would soon appear in the assembly, and from thence be communicated among the people at large.

The only remedy is to throw the rich and the proud into one group, in a separate assembly, and there tie their hands; if you give them scope with the people at large, or their representatives, they will destroy *all equality and liberty, with the consent and acclamations of the people themselves*. They will have much more power, mixed with the representatives, than separated from them. In the first case, if they unite, they will give the law, and govern all; if they differ, they will divide the state, and go to a decision by force. But placing them alone by themselves, the society avails itself of all their abilities and virtues; they become a solid check to the representatives themselves, as well as to the executive power, and you disarm them entirely of the power to do mischief.

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