

THE INSTITUTE FOR ANACYCLOSIS

EXCERPT FROM
THE IDEA OF HISTORICAL RECURRENCE IN WESTERN THOUGHT
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1979 A.D.

Note: This text from the introduction of one of the most thorough scholarly analyses of Anacyclosis provides a concise thumbnail sketch of Polybius' version of Anacyclosis. Footnotes have been omitted.

Chapter 1. The Polybian *Anacyclōsis* or Cycle of Governments

By the middle of the second century BC Rome had subjugated almost all of the then known world, including such formidable powers as Macedon and Carthage. Polybius of Megalopolis wrote his *Historiae* to explain how this had happened. The thirty-nine books received their final form after 146 BC, although he probably began writing before he was exiled from Achaia to Rome in 170. At first interested in Greek affairs, his experience of Rome and her rapidly expanding empire dramatically altered his perspective. He attempted what he called universal (rather than ethnic, “national,” or local) history, the kind of history which Rome’s new world dominion had made possible. At one time an official of the Achaian League, a celebrity in the circle of brilliant Romans surrounding Scipio Aemilianus, and an intrepid traveler, Polybius was better equipped to write of Rome’s rise to power than most of his contemporaries. He wrote with confidence, believing his work to be of immense practical value for the politician and the student of history. He is best known for the sixth book of this history, the book in which he considered the merits of Rome’s constitution and argued that a crucial factor in her success was the stability of her political institutions. The opening sections of that book will occupy most of our attention in this chapter, for there he sketched a model of historical change which he termed ἀνακύκλωσις πολιτειῶν (the cycle of governments). The *Anacyclōsis* forms an excellent beginning point for our investigations into the idea of historical recurrence. It is a key example of that cyclical thinking about history so commonly associated with the Greek view of life. What is more, it reflects the attempt to bring into a systematic relationship several ideas of recurrence so as to form a coherent theory.

According to Polybius, the *Anacyclōsis* was the natural course or order in which constitutions change, are transformed, and return again to their original stage (*Hist.* VI, ix, 10). Identifying six types of constitutions, he tried to show how they followed one another in a fixed sequence. The first type, kingship (*basileia*), was the just reign of one man by hereditary succession. This constitution degenerated into tyranny, an unjust hereditary rule which is the vicious form allied to kingship (and sometimes called monarchy). Tyranny was replaced in turn by aristocracy, the worthy rule of a few influential citizens, but this also lapsed into its degenerate counterpart, oligarchy—the régime of the irresponsible and greedy few. Democracy, an orderly rule by the whole people, arose on the destruction of oligarchy, but it, too, changed into its vicious complement, mob rule (*ochlocratia*), thus completing the series. Polybius presented two accounts of this process in summary form (VI, iv, 7-10, v, 4-ix, 9) and in the second he attempted to isolate the causes of the transformations from one type of government to another. He also made it clear that the series began and ended with the same socio-political order—an elementary form of monarchy. This monarchy preceded kingship in the first instance and followed mob rule in the last, and it was understood to be the natural rule over men when their behavior and conditions of existence are the most animal-like. With this at the beginning and end of the sequence, the whole natural process appears capable of continuous repetition, even if Polybius bequeathed us no historical example of such a recurrence in the life of a given political entity, and even though he spent remarkably little time on the theoretical idea of an orderly cyclical process continuing ad infinitum.

Thus the *Anacyclōsis* covers a series of stages, including a zigzag line of change (*metabolē*) between worthy and unworthy constitutions, as well as a return to an original point of departure where the fixed sequence of stages begins again. According to Polybius, one could therefore prognosticate not only the most likely immediate destiny of a given constitution but also the eventual reversion of all political societies to a primitive state, a state which he associated with bestiality or the vulgar herd, and with the emergence of a strong monarchical master.

Such a comprehensive picture of recurring political processes is unique in classical literature. Among Greek and Roman writers whose works have survived, Polybius is the most advanced theoretical exponent of historical recurrence. He had imbibed enough of the specialist's world of Academicians, Peripatetics, and Stoics to formulate abstract philosophical principles of his own, shown nowhere more ostentatiously than in the *Historiae* Bk. VI. Whether he created or reproduced the theoretical model of *Anacyclōsis*, that model enabled him succinctly to combine numerous traditional lines of Greek thinking about ordered change, growth and decay, the nature and fate of all things, into one systematic overview.

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