

THE INSTITUTE FOR ANACYCLOSIS
EXCERPT FROM
THE COMMONWEALTH OF OCEANA
BY JAMES HARRINGTON

1656 A.D.

Note: This text asserts that the Greek typology of constitutional forms as described by Polybius, along with their tendency to degenerate, represents “the doctrine of the ancients.” It is striking that of all ancient authors who promulgated different typologies (including Plato and Aristotle, who were both referenced in this work), that Harrington in this way chose Polybius as the representative of ancient political thought (reading “anarchy” as the equivalent of “ochlocracy”). The different phases of Polybius’ typology are laid out in the sequence of Anacyclosis, and are followed by a brief recap of the doctrine of the mixed constitution. In addition, Harrington early correlated the possession of wealth (e.g., lands, money, or goods) to the exercise of political power, which is consistent with fundamental premise held by The Institute that the diffusion of wealth tends to precede the diffusion of political power, with the emergence of a middle class being the natural condition precedent of democracy.

Part I. The Preliminaries. Showing the Principles of Government

...

Government, according to the ancients, and their learned disciple Machiavel, the only politician of later ages, is of three kinds: the government of one man, or of the better sort, or of the whole people; which, by their more learned names, are called monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. These they hold, through their proneness to degenerate, to be all evil. For whereas they that govern should govern according to reason, if they govern according to passion they do that which they should not do. Wherefore, as reason and passion are two things, so government by reason is one thing, and the corruption of government by passion is another thing, but not always another government: as a body that is alive is one thing, and a body that is dead is another thing, but not always another creature, though the corruption of one comes at length to be the generation of another. The corruption then of monarchy is called tyranny; that of aristocracy, oligarchy and that of democracy, anarchy. But legislators, having found these three governments at the best to be naught, have invented another, consisting of a mixture of them all, which only is good. This is the doctrine of the ancients.

But Leviathan is positive that they are all deceived, and that there is no other government in nature than one of the three; as also that the flesh of them cannot stink, the names of their corruptions being but the names of men's fancies, which will be understood when we are shown which of them was Senatus Populusque Romanus.

To go my own way, and yet to follow the ancients, the principles of government are twofold: internal, or the goods of the mind; and external, or the goods of fortune. The goods of the mind are natural or acquired virtues, as wisdom, prudence, and courage, etc. The goods of fortune are riches. There be goods also of the body, as health, beauty, strength; but these are not to be brought into account upon this score, because if a man or an army acquires victory or empire, it is more from their discipline, arms, and courage than from their natural health, beauty, or strength, in regard that a people conquered may have more of natural strength, beauty, and health, and yet find little remedy. The principles of government then are in the goods of the mind, or in the goods of fortune. To the goods of the mind answers authority; to the goods of fortune, power or empire. Wherefore Leviathan, though he be right where he says that “riches

are power,” is mistaken where he says that “prudence, or the reputation of prudence, is power;” for the learning or prudence of a man is no more power than the learning or prudence of a book or author, which is properly authority. A learned writer may have authority though he has no power; and a foolish magistrate may have power, though he has otherwise no esteem or authority. The difference of these two is observed by Livy in Evander, of whom he says that he governed rather by the authority of others than by his own power.

To begin with riches, in regard that men are hung upon these, not of choice as upon the other, but of necessity and by the teeth; forasmuch as he who wants bread is his servant that will feed him, if a man thus feeds a whole people, they are under his empire.

Empire is of two kinds, domestic and national, or foreign and provincial.

Domestic empire is founded upon dominion. Dominion is property, real or personal; that is to say, in lands, or in money and goods.

Lands, or the parts and parcels of a territory, are held by the proprietor or proprietors, lord or lords of it, in some proportion; and such (except it be in a city that has little or no land, and whose revenue is in trade) as is the proportion or balance of dominion or property in land, such is the nature of the empire.

If one man be sole landlord of a territory, or overbalance the people, for example, three parts in four, he is grand seignior; for so the Turk is called from his property, and his empire is absolute monarchy.

If the few or a nobility, or a nobility with the clergy, be landlords, or overbalance the people to the like proportion, it makes the Gothic balance (to be shown at large in the second part of this discourse), and the empire is mixed monarchy, as that of Spain, Poland, and late of Oceana.

And if the whole people be landlords, or hold the lands so divided among them that no one man, or number of men, within the compass of the few or aristocracy, overbalance them, the empire (without the interposition of force) is a commonwealth.

If force be interposed in any of these three cases, it must either frame the government to the foundation, or the foundation to the government; or holding the government not according to the balance, it is not natural, but violent; and therefore if it be at the devotion of a prince, it is tyranny; if at the devotion of the few, oligarchy; or if in the power of the people, anarchy: Each of which confusions, the balance standing otherwise, is but of short continuance, because against the nature of the balance, which, not destroyed, destroys that which opposes it.

But there be certain other confusions, which, being rooted in the balance, are of longer continuance, and of worse consequence; as, first, where a nobility holds half the property, or about that proportion, and the people the other half; in which case, without altering the balance there is no remedy but the one must eat out the other, as the people did the nobility in Athens, and the nobility the people in Rome. Secondly, when a prince holds about half the dominion, and the people the other half (which was the case of the Roman emperors, planted partly upon their military colonies and partly upon the Senate and the people), the government becomes a very shambles, both of the princes and the people. ...

* * *