

THE INSTITUTE FOR ANACYCLOSIS

EXCERPT FROM
THE LESSONS OF HISTORY
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Note: This text describes a sequence of historical events that follows a “Platonic wheel”; this is an allusion to Anacyclosis. Significantly, Plato was the only person mentioned by Polybius in his description of Anacyclosis. The historical narrative below places particular emphasis on the arrival and departure of democracy, which is timely. The Durants’ recognition that the concentration of wealth need not be attributed chiefly to malice or the “perversity of the rich”, but can instead be conceived as the natural result of economic development and human nature, is noteworthy. It is also plausible, since a case can be made that the tragedy of the commons – of which the desolation of the middle classes and the correlative failure of democracy is the supreme example – arises more from neglect than malice. Footnotes and corresponding references in the original text have been omitted.

X. Government and History

... By the time of Plato’s death (347 B.C.) his hostile analysis of Athenian democracy was approaching apparent confirmation by history. Athens recovered wealth, but this was now commercial rather than landed wealth; industrialists, merchants, and bankers were at the top of the reshuffled heap. The change produced a feverish struggle for money, a *pleonexia*, as the Greeks called it – an appetite for more and more. The *nouveaux riches* (*neoplutoi*) built gaudy mansions, bedecked their women with costly robes and jewelry, spoiled them with dozens of servants, rivaled one another in the feasts with which they regaled their guests. The gap between the rich and the poor widened; Athens was divided, as Plato put it, into “two cities: ... one the city of the poor, the other of the rich, the one at war with the other.” The poor schemed to despoil the rich by legislation, taxation, and revolution; the rich organized themselves for protection against the poor. The members of some oligarchic organizations, says Aristotle, took a solemn oath: “I will be an adversary of the people” (i.e., the commonality), “and in the Council I will do all the evil that I can.” “The rich have become so unsocial,” wrote Isocrates about 366 B.C., “that those who own property had rather throw their possessions into the sea than lend aid to the needy, while those who are in poorer circumstances would less gladly find a treasure than seize the possessions of the rich.” The poorer citizens captured control of the Assembly, and began to vote the money of the rich into the coffers of the state, for redistribution among the people through governmental enterprises and subsidies. The politicians strained their ingenuity to discover new sources of public revenue. In some cities the decentralizing of wealth was more direct: the debtors in Mytilene massacred their creditors en masse; the democrats of Argos fell upon the rich, killed hundreds of them, and confiscated their property. The moneyed families of otherwise hostile Greek states leagued themselves secretly for mutual aid against popular revolts. The middle classes, as well as the rich, began to distrust democracy as empowered envy, and the poor distrusted it as a sham equality of votes nullified by a gaping inequality of wealth. The rising bitterness of the class war left Greece internally as well as internationally divided when Philip of Macedon pounced down upon it in 338 B.C., and many rich Greeks welcomed his coming as preferable to revolution. Athenian democracy disappeared under Macedonian dictatorship.

Plato’s reduction of political evolution to a sequence of monarchy, aristocracy, democracy, and dictatorship found another illustration in the history of Rome. During the third and second centuries before Christ a Roman oligarchy organized a foreign policy and a disciplined army, and conquered and exploited the Mediterranean world. The wealth so won was absorbed by the patricians, and the commerce so developed raised to luxurious opulence the upper middle class. Conquered Greeks, Orientals, and

Africans were brought to Italy to serve as slaves on the *latifundia*; the native farmers, displaced from the soil, joined the restless, breeding proletariat in the cities, to enjoy the monthly dole of grain that Caius Gracchus had secured for the poor in 123 B.C. Generals and proconsuls returned from the provinces loaded with spoils for themselves and the ruling class; millionaires multiplied; mobile money replaced land as the source or instrument of political power; rival factions competed in the wholesale purchase of candidates and votes; in 53 B.C. one group of voters received ten million sesterces for its support. When money failed, murder was available: citizens who had voted the wrong way were in some instances beaten close to death and their houses were set on fire. Antiquity had never known so rich, so powerful, and so corrupt a government. The aristocrats engaged Pompey to maintain their ascendancy; the commoners cast in their lot with Caesar; ordeal of battle replaced the auctioning of victory; Caesar won, and established a popular dictatorship. Aristocrats killed him, but ended by accepting the dictatorship of his grandnephew and stepson Augustus (27 B.C.). Democracy ended, monarchy was restored; the Platonic wheel had come full turn.

We may infer, from these classic examples, that ancient democracy, corroded with slavery, venality, and war, did not deserve the name, and offers no fair test of popular government. In America democracy had a wider base. It began with the advantage of a British heritage: Anglo-Saxon law, which, from Magna Carta onward, had defended the citizens against the state; and Protestantism, which had opened the way to religious and mental liberty. The American Revolution was not only a revolt of colonials against a distant government; it was also an uprising of a native middle class against an imported aristocracy. The rebellion was eased and quickened by an abundance of free land and a minimum of legislation. Men who owned the soil they tilled, and (within the limits of nature) controlled the conditions under which they lived, had an economic footing for political freedom; their personality and character were rooted in the earth. It was such men who made Jefferson president – Jefferson who was as skeptical as Voltaire and as revolutionary as Rousseau. A government that governed least was admirably suited to liberate those individualistic energies that transformed America from a wilderness to a material utopia, and from the child and ward to the rival and guardian of Western Europe. And while rural isolation enhanced the freedom of the individual, national isolation provided liberty and security within protective seas. These and a hundred other conditions gave to America a democracy more basic and universal than history has ever seen.

Many of these formative conditions have disappeared. Personal isolation is gone through the growth of cities. Personal independence is gone through the dependence of the worker upon tools and capital that he does not own, and upon conditions that he cannot control. ... Free land is gone, through home ownership spreads – with a minimum of land. The once self-employed shopkeeper is in the toils of the big distributor, and may echo Marx's compliant that everything is in chains. Economic freedom, even in the middle classes, becomes more and more exceptional, making political freedom as consolatory pretense. And all this has come about not (as we thought in our hot youth) through the perversity of the rich, but through the impersonal fatality of economic development, and through the nature of man. Every advance in the complexity of the economy puts an added premium upon superior ability, and intensifies the concentration of wealth, responsibility, and political power.

... In England and the United States, in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, in Switzerland and Canada, democracy is today sounder than ever before. ... If race or class war divides us into hostile camps, changing political argument into blind hate, one side or the other may overturn the hustings with the rule of the sword. If our economy of freedom fails to distribute wealth as ably as it has created it, the road to dictatorship will be open to any man who can persuasively promise security to all; and a martial government, under whatever charming phrases, will engulf the democratic world.

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