

THE INSTITUTE FOR ANACYCLOSIS

EXCERPT FROM  
THE POLITICS  
BY ARISTOTLE

C. 350 B.C.

*Note: This text contains the most sensible observations on the moderate nature and superior qualities of the middle class which have universal application no matter the scale of political analysis, whether cities, states, or empires. Many observations herein are essential to the philosophy of The Institute.*

Book IV. 1295a -1297a

...

But what is the best constitution and what is the best mode of life for most cities and most of mankind ... possible for most states to attain? ... For if it has been rightly said in the Ethics that the happy life is the life that is lived without impediment in accordance with virtue, and that virtue is a middle course, it necessarily follows that the middle course of life is the best—such a middle course as it is possible for each class of men to attain. And these same criteria must also necessarily apply to the goodness and badness of a state, and of a constitution—for a constitution is a certain mode of life of a state. In all states therefore there exist three divisions of the state, the very rich, the very poor, and thirdly those who are between the two. Since then it is admitted that what is moderate or in the middle is best, it is manifest that the middle amount of all of the good things of fortune is the best amount to possess. For this degree of wealth is the readiest to obey reason, whereas for a person who is exceedingly beautiful or strong or nobly born or rich, or the opposite—exceedingly poor or weak or of very mean station, it is difficult to follow the bidding of reason; for the former turn more to insolence and grand wickedness, and the latter overmuch to malice and petty wickedness, and the motive of all wrongdoing is either insolence or malice. And moreover the middle class are the least inclined to shun office and to covet office, and both these tendencies are injurious to states. And in addition to these points, those who have an excess of fortune's goods, strength, wealth, friends and the like, are not willing to be governed and do not know how to be (and they have acquired this quality even in their boyhood from their home-life, which was so luxurious that they have not got used to submitting to authority even in school), while those who are excessively in need of these things are too humble. Hence the latter class do not know how to govern but know how to submit to government of a servile kind, while the former class do not know how to submit to any government, and only know how to govern in the manner of a master. The result is a state consisting of slaves and masters, not of free men, and of one class envious and another contemptuous of their fellows. This condition of affairs is very far removed from friendliness, and from political partnership—for friendliness is an element of partnership, since men are not willing to be partners with their enemies even on a journey. But surely the ideal of the state is to consist as much as possible of persons that are equal and alike, and this similarity is most found in the middle classes; therefore the middle-class state will necessarily be best constituted in respect of those elements of which we say that the state is by nature composed. And also this class of citizens have the greatest security in the states; for they do not themselves covet other men's goods as do the poor, nor do the other classes covet their substance as the poor covet that of the rich; and because they are neither plotted against nor plotting they live free from danger. Because of this it was a good prayer of Phocylides –

*“In many things the middle have the best; Be mine a middle station.”*

It is clear therefore also that the political community administered by the middle class is the best, and that it is possible for those states to be well governed that are of the kind in which the middle class is numerous, and preferably stronger than both the other two classes, or at all events than one of them, for by throwing in its weight it sways the balance and prevents the opposite extremes from coming into existence. Hence it is the greatest good fortune if the men that have political power possess a moderate and sufficient substance, since where some own a very great deal of property and others none there comes about either an extreme democracy or an unmixed oligarchy, or a tyranny may result from both of the two extremes, for tyranny springs from both democracy and oligarchy of the most unbridled kind, but much less often from the middle forms of constitution and those near to them. The cause of this we will speak of later in our treatment of political revolutions. That the middle form of constitution is the best is evident; for it alone is free from faction, since where the middle class is numerous, factions and party divisions among the citizens are least likely to occur. And the great states are more free from faction for the same reason, because the middle class is numerous, whereas in the small states it is easy to divide the whole people into two parties leaving nothing in between, and also almost everybody is needy or wealthy. Also democracies are more secure and more long-lived than oligarchies owing to the citizens of the middle class (for they are more numerous and have a larger share of the honors in democracies than in oligarchies), since when the poor are in a majority without the middle class, adversity sets in and they are soon ruined. And it must be deemed a significant fact that the best lawgivers are from among the middle citizens; for Solon was of that class, as appears from his poetry, and so was Lycurgus (for he was not a king) and Charondas and almost the greatest number of the other lawgivers.

And these considerations also show the reason why the constitutions of most states are either democratic or oligarchical; owing to the middle class in these states being often a small one, the classes diverging from the middle status—whichever of the two, the owners of the estates or the people, from time to time has the upper hand—conduct the government on their own lines, so that it becomes either a democracy or an oligarchy. And in addition to this, because factions occur and fights between the people and the wealthy, whichever party happens to gain the upper hand over its opponents does not establish a common or equal government, but takes the superior share in the government as a prize of victory, and makes it a democracy in the one case and an oligarchy in the other. Moreover each of the two states that in the past held the leadership of Greece took as a pattern the form of government that existed among themselves and set up in the one case democracies and in the other oligarchies in the cities, not considering the interest of the cities but their own advantage. Hence owing to these causes the middle form of constitution either never comes into existence or seldom and in few places; for one man only among the states that have formerly held the leadership was induced to grant this form of organization, and by this time it has become a fixed habit with the people of the separate cities also not even to desire equality, but either to seek to rule or to endure being under a master. ...

...the lawgiver in his constitution must always take in the middle class; if he is making the laws of an oligarchical character he must keep the middle class in view, and if democratic, he must legislate so as to bring them in. And where the number of the middle class exceeds both the extreme classes together, or even one of them only, here it is possible for a constitutional government to be lasting; for there is no fear of the rich ever coming to terms with the poor against this numerous middle class; for neither class will ever wish to be subject to the other, and if they look for another constitution fairer to both than this they will not find one, for they would not endure to take turns to govern because they distrust each other: everywhere it is the arbitrator that is most trusted, and the man in the middle is an arbitrator. ...

\* \* \*