

## THE INSTITUTE FOR ANACYCLOSIS

### WHERE WE ARE

The diffusion of political power tends to follow the diffusion of wealth. Throughout history, people have generally needed to obtain some wealth before attaining much influence. The emergence of a middle class thus precedes the emergence of democracy in the natural sequence of human events. In antiquity, the first middle classes were mainly agrarian. They can be found in the qualifications of Greek and Roman military service. Today the middle classes are generally not farmers, although the English and American yeomanry attests to an ancient agrarian strain.

Whatever their occupations, as time passed both the middle classes and the needs of government expanded. The contributions made by the middle classes to their communities became indispensable. This gave justification and force to the claims of greater numbers of people to participate in the governance of those communities. Gradually, enough people attained enough political rights that democracy emerged. This pattern is found in varying degrees of clarity in history. The development of a middle class anticipates the establishment of democracy.

While the rise of the middle class emancipates the common people, its decline has the opposite effect. The people of the middle class must be free so they are not property or slaves. They must have enough property that they do not depend on others for their livelihood. They must not have so much property that they do not need to work for a living. They must have enough opportunity that they can work for a living. And they must be industrious so that they do work for a living. Where the traits of the middle class do not prevail, insecurity or dependency necessarily would.

Where insecurity or dependency prevails, the people are wards or subjects of the powerful. Even if the people were technically free, economic necessity or convenience would compel political subordination. If hardship or idleness should persist after democracy were entrenched, political struggle would conform to the rules of patronage. The most ambitious patrons would be the populist advocates of the poor. Their policy would arise from their promises to improve the condition of the poor. Their power would derive from the universal franchise.

Systems of patronage have existed throughout history. They have typically not existed alongside the universal franchise, however. The insecurity or dependency of the masses posed no real threat to the upper class so long as the lowest class cast the fewest votes. Indeed, the meekness of the multitude has often benefited the rich. That would not long be the case if enough of the middle class descended into the lower class. If the middle class recedes, the universal suffrage which rode in on its tide would not so quickly retreat from its high water mark.

The wealth of the middle class is now being siphoned into the upper class while its people are being drained into the lower class. These trends are troubling because their consequences are not hard to foresee. If they continue, our society will be stratified between many poor and few rich. At some point our middle class will become too weak to reconcile their mutual animosities. As these animosities grow, our society will be increasingly divided by a contest between the rich and the poor. This contest will be conducted by the popular leaders, or demagogues.

The campaigns of the demagogues will further impair the middle class. Demagogues blame the policies of the rich for the grievances of the poor. They incite the poor to demand relief from the rich. Plutocrats, who control policy by controlling wealth, deflect this liability back down onto the middle class. They find clever ways to make the middle class incur the ultimate expense of government while recouping any outlay which inconveniences them. The demagogues submit to this as it suits their purposes and because the middle class is far easier to exploit than the plutocrats.

Under the policies of the plutocrats, wealth will be ever more concentrated in the rich. But as greater numbers fall out of the middle class, their insecurity and dependency will also grow. This will further increase the role of government and the power of the demagogues. In time, the middle class will be exhausted. It will merge with the poor. The moderate elements of the rich will realize at last that the excesses of the plutocrats have imperiled their own interests. In their obsession with increasing their hoards, they neglected the walls which defend them.

The middle class is the only thing standing between democracy and class warfare. Demagogues agitate for the redistribution of wealth wherever they exist. They rally the poorer elements of society to their cause. In the age of democracy, their pandering is stifled not by the laws of the rich, but by the customs of the middle class. The customs of industry and modesty derive from the middle class. A respect for property rights is inherent to the middle class. The masses must nevertheless have property in order to respect and defend it.

Demagogues operate by purchasing the loyalty of the poor with the property of others. No voice will oppose the plunder of the rich if the middle class is diluted into oblivion. There will also be nothing left to plunder but the property of the rich. If the middle class falls, the rich will eventually be despoiled. It is the next chapter of an old story. The base ambition for gain infiltrates the slightest breach in the legal and political regime, usurping public authority to serve factional interest. Whereas the plutocrats use wealth to serve their interests, the demagogues use voters to serve theirs.

The forced redistribution of wealth is probably the most obvious idea to restore the middle class. While this policy may help individuals, the dependency it promotes must undermine the middle class. It would be managed by demagogues under rules of patronage. Since demagogues subsist upon dependence, they cannot actually let the middle class recover without destroying their own power. They may mitigate, but must perpetuate, the dependency of the people. Forced redistribution of wealth may sustain a dependent lower class but it cannot sustain an independent middle class.

More worrisome, the forced redistribution of wealth requires extraordinary power. The quantum of power required to subjugate the plutocrats presupposes a power great enough to subjugate all. Political power is as often abused as wealth. The lofty goals and ambitions of demagogues naturally give them a despotic slant. An extreme concentration of power is not the best solution to an extreme concentration of wealth. It would be better to persuade the plutocrats to find clever ways to diffuse wealth back into the middle class so that force does not become necessary or justified.

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