

THE RATIONIST

TWELVE ESSAYS INTRODUCING A PROPOSED AMENDMENT TO THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA TO PRESERVE THE DEMOCRATIC-REPUBLICAN MODEL OF GOVERNMENT.

ADDRESSED TO THE PEOPLE OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

BY GRACCHUS, A LOYAL CITIZEN.

**NUMBER FIVE:
THAT THE SOCIETY OF THE MIDDLE CLASS IS BEST.**

To the People of the United States of America:

For there are three ranks of citizens; the rich, a useless set, that ever crave for more; the poor and destitute, fearful folk, that cherish envy more than is right, and shoot out grievous stings against the men who have anything, beguiled as they are by the eloquence of vicious leaders; while the class that is midmost of the three preserves cities, observing such order as the state ordains.

Euripides

In our prior essay, we considered the **POWERS** of the middle class that are necessary to create democracy. We now survey the **VIRTUES** of the middle class that are necessary to sustain it.

Observing that the middle class preserved the calmest waters in the otherwise rough seas of politics – at least where popular government is concerned – both ancient and modern writers credited such political temperance to a bundle of qualities which we hereafter collectively describe as the **MIDDLING VIRTUES**. We will consider excerpts celebrating these middling virtues by two such writers at length. The first is Aristotle writing during mankind's first wave of democracy. The second is Alexis de Tocqueville at the onset of its second. We rely heavily on their commentary not only for their insight and eloquence but also for their authority, as both writers wrote on the basis of their own impartial first-hand observations:

ARISTOTLE ON THE MIDDLE CLASS.

Aristotle praises the middle class in the following passages, emphasizing its ability to promote political moderation and stability and to quell political faction:

In all states 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.

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.

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.

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.

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 taking 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.

Aristotle praised the middle class not only for its calming influence. He also noted that the busy lives of a self-sufficient middle class forestall political agitations by distracting the people from politics:

When therefore the farmer class and the class possessed of moderate property is sovereign over the government, they govern according to laws; for they have a livelihood if they work, but are not able to be at leisure, so they put the law in control and hold the minimum of assemblies necessary.

It is possible to introduce democracy as well as other forms of constitution where the multitude lives by agriculture or by pasturing cattle. For owing to their not having much property they are busy, so that they cannot often meet in the assembly, while owing to their having the necessities of life they pass their time attending to their farmwork and do not covet their neighbor's goods, but find more pleasure in working than in taking part in politics and holding office, where the profits to be made from the offices are not large; for the mass of mankind are more covetous of gain than of honor.

Though modern democracies are no longer chiefly agrarian, Aristotle's conclusions remain relevant regardless of ever-changing economic practices, owing to the never-changing characteristics, uniformity, and constancy of human nature as considered in our second essay.

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE ON THE MIDDLE CLASS.

In 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville arrived in the United States for a nine-month tour of the young republic. His report on the moderating and stabilizing influence of the early American middle class echo Aristotle's observations, but offers far more than an uncritical restatement of them. Tocqueville also emphasized that the devotion of a middling people to increasing their fortunes – a trait also acknowledged by Aristotle – renders society conducive to robust commerce, also consistent with the conclusions in our second essay:

Almost all the revolutions which have changed the aspect of nations have been made to consolidate or destroy social inequality. Remove the secondary causes which have produced the great convulsions of the world, and you will almost always find the principle of inequality at the bottom. Either the poor have attempted to plunder the rich, or the rich to enslave the poor. If then a state of society can ever be founded in which every man shall have something to keep, and little to take from others, much will have been done for the peace of the world.

Amongst a great democratic people there will always be some members of the community in great poverty, and others in great opulence; but the poor, instead of forming the immense majority of the nation, as is always the case in aristocratic communities, are comparatively few in number, and the laws do not bind them together by the ties of irremediable and hereditary penury. The wealthy, on their side, are scarce and powerless; they have no privileges which attract public observation; even their wealth, as it is no longer incorporated and bound up with the soil, is impalpable, and as it were invisible. As there is no longer a race of poor men, so there is no longer a race of rich men; the latter spring up daily from the multitude, and relapse into it again. Hence they do not form a distinct class, which may be easily marked out and plundered; and, moreover, as they are connected with the mass of their fellow-citizens by a thousand secret ties, the people cannot assail them without inflicting an injury upon itself.

Between these two extremes of democratic communities stand an innumerable multitude of men almost alike, who, without being exactly either rich or poor, are possessed of sufficient property to desire the maintenance of order, yet not enough to excite envy. Such men are the natural enemies of violent commotions: their stillness keeps all beneath them and above them still, and secures the balance of the fabric of society. Not indeed that even these men are contented with what they have gotten, or that they feel a natural abhorrence for a revolution in which they might share the spoil without sharing the calamity; on the contrary, they desire, with unexampled ardor, to get rich, but the difficulty is to know from whom riches can be taken. The same state of society which constantly prompts desires, restrains these desires within necessary limits: it gives men more liberty of changing and less interest in change.

Not only are the men of democracies not naturally desirous of revolutions, but they are afraid of them. All revolutions more or less threaten the tenure of property: but most of those who live in democratic countries are possessed of property – not only are they possessed of property, but they live in the condition of men who set the greatest store

upon their property. If we attentively consider each of the classes of which society is composed, it is easy to see that the passions engendered by property are keenest and most tenacious amongst the middle classes.

In addition to these points, Tocqueville elaborated on the societal harmony and cohesion produced by the uniform, commonsense, and consistent opinions shared by the middle class. He observed that their plain and steady outlooks produce a general skepticism, arriving at a common reluctance for political innovation and adventurism within the body politic. Similar to Aristotle, he also observed that people within the middle class are too busy working and making a living and planning their various enterprises and diversions to be much distracted by grandiose ideas:

Men who are equal in rights, in education, in fortune, or, to comprise all in one word, in their social condition, have necessarily wants, habits, and tastes which are hardly dissimilar. As they look at objects under the same aspect, their minds naturally tend to analogous conclusions; and, though each of them may deviate from his contemporaries and from opinions of his own, they will involuntarily and unconsciously concur in a certain number of received opinions.

I believe that it will rarely happen to any man amongst a democratic community, suddenly to frame a system of notions very remote from that which his contemporaries have adopted; and if some such innovator appeared, I apprehend that he would have great difficulty in finding listeners, still more in finding believers.

Even when the reliance of a democratic people has been won, it is still no easy matter to gain their attention. It is extremely difficult to obtain a hearing from men living in democracies unless it be to speak to them of themselves. They do not attend to the things said to them, because they are always fully engrossed with the things they are doing. For indeed few men are idle in democratic nations; life is passed in the midst of noise and excitement, and men are so engaged in acting that little remains to them for thinking. I would especially remark that they are not only employed, but that they are passionately devoted to their employments. They are always in action, and each of their actions absorbs their faculties: the zeal which they display in business puts out the enthusiasm they might otherwise entertain for ideas. I think that it is extremely difficult to excite the enthusiasm of a democratic people for any theory which has not a palpable, direct, and immediate connection with the daily occupations of life.

THE MIDDLING VIRTUES SUMMARIZED.

From the considerations set forth above and in our prior essay, we can abstract the middling virtues that are conducive to the creation and preservation of authentic popular government. An independent, upright, and preeminent middle class:

FIRST, possesses the means to satisfy the necessities of life, minimizing its demands upon the public treasury and its hostility toward the wealthy;

SECOND, does not depend upon governments or patrons for its livelihood, reducing its susceptibility to political patronage, electoral bribery, and demagoguery;

THIRD, possesses a financial surplus, enabling it to make indispensable contributions to the state, rendering the body politic democratically potent;

FOURTH, is financially independent, also enabling it to withdraw its support from the regime, making government responsive to its grievances;

FIFTH, is busy in its labors and engrossed in its diversions and enterprises, diminishing the time and attention devoted to political movements and agitations;

SIXTH, forms practical and steady opinions, making it skeptical of novel, utopian, and revolutionary ideas, blunting the energies of sensationalism and propaganda;

SEVENTH, imposes its moderate opinions, beliefs, and sentiments upon the body politic, sedating the most virulent strains of economic popular faction; and

EIGHTH, is jealous of property and desirous of respectable economic gain, encouraging robust commerce and safeguarding the rights of property and contract.

This preliminary list of middling virtues collectively describes not only the conditions required to sustain authentic democracy and therefore to establish a lasting popular government within any political system, but also describes the optimal socioeconomic characteristics of human society. As a general proposition, the most moderate and stable political society arises from an upright, independent, and predominant middle class whose members are possessed of the middling virtues, content in their optimistic pursuit of higher status, and capable of withdrawing their consent from the prevailing regime. The former quality keeps the people from turning against each other, while the latter keeps elites in fear of them.

We may from the foregoing considerations conclude that **THE BEST POLITICAL SOCIETY IS NOT WHERE THE PEOPLE'S GRIEVANCES ARE LOUDLY PROCLAIMED. IT IS RATHER WHERE THE PEOPLE'S VOICE CAN BE HEARD, BUT THEY HAVE NOTHING TO SAY.**

Now that we have considered the envious state of political affairs made possible by a democratically-potent middle class, we will next consider the probable course of events that unfolds when that middle class unravels.

GRACCHUS.