

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.

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**NUMBER THREE:
THE CYCLE OF POLITICAL REVOLUTION: ANACYCLOSIS.**

To the People of the United States of America:

At this point begins that orbit of development with whose natural motion and circular course you must become acquainted with from its beginning. For the foundation of that political wisdom which is the aim of our whole discourse is an understanding of the regular curving path through which governments travel, in order that, when you know what direction any commonwealth tends to take, you may be able to hold it back or take measures to meet the change.

Cicero

Having considered the underlying causes of political revolution, we shall now consider its probable course. This sequence was named **ANACYCLOSIS** (ἀνακύκλωσις) by Polybius, a Greek historian who as a slave to one of its leading households was uniquely situated to witness the events commencing the terminal decline of the Roman Republic. This essay begins with an overview of the ancient Greek political archetypes, there being no better way to express Anacyclosis than through the original political vocabulary, which remains the common political vocabulary.

THE GREEK CONSTITUTIONAL ARCHETYPES.

More than two thousand years ago, the ancient Greeks distilled the varieties of political society into a handful of political archetypes. These archetypes, described as constitutional forms, political forms, regime types, forms of government, and the like, are familiar to us all. We still apply them to imagine our own political reality and to defame our political adversaries. Democracy. Tyranny. Oligarchy. Monarchy. Aristocracy. Though corrupted by centuries of use and abuse, their plain meanings are clear enough for our immediate purposes with this caveat: the term “democracy” should today be conceived as encompassing representative democracy, and not limited solely to Athenian-style direct democracy.

The Greeks reasoned that every state must be ruled by one, a few, or many people. The primary constitutional archetypes are correspondingly kingship, aristocracy, and democracy. They also recognized that each regime would inure to either the public or private benefit. Multiplying the three **QUANTITATIVE** aspects (one, few, or many rulers) by these two

QUALITATIVE aspects (whether the regime is administered for the public or private benefit) yields a matrix of six basic constitutional forms. Not every Greek writer employed the same archetypes. We adopt the matrix described by Polybius because his typology is incorporated into the narrative of Anacyclosis. Polybius classifies the main political archetypes as:

KINGSHIP (one ruler, for the public benefit);

TYRANNY (one ruler, for the private benefit);

ARISTOCRACY (few rulers, for the public benefit);

OLIGARCHY (few rulers, for the private benefit);

DEMOCRACY (many rulers, for the public benefit); and

OCHLOCRACY (many rulers, for the private benefit).

THE CONSTITUTIONAL ARCHETYPES PLACED IN THEIR NATURAL EVOLUTIONARY SEQUENCE: ANACYCLOSIS.

According to Polybius's narrative of Anacyclosis, political society begins in primitive monarchy. This chiefdom crystallizes into kingship. Kingship is corrupted into tyranny. Tyranny is overthrown by aristocracy. Aristocracy degenerates into oligarchy. The people eventually establish democracy. Democracy in turn degenerates into ochlocracy, literally **MOB RULE**. Only a strongman can quell the ensuing chaos, thereby returning political society to monarchy. In Polybius's words:

The first of these to come into being is monarchy, its growth being natural and unaided; and next arises kingship derived from monarchy by the aid of art and by the correction of defects. Monarchy first changes into its vicious allied form, tyranny; and next, the abolishment of both gives birth to aristocracy. Aristocracy by its very nature degenerates into oligarchy; and when the commons inflamed by anger take vengeance on this government for its unjust rule, democracy comes into being; and in due course the licence and lawlessness of this form of government produces mob-rule to complete the series.

Modern research verifies that, sure enough, monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy generally peaked among the ancient Greek city-states consistent with this sequence. Monarchies were the most common regime from 700 BC until circa 450 BC, then oligarchies until circa 350 BC, then democracies until the conquests of Macedonia, and finally Rome.

Polybius described Anacyclosis soon after the destruction of Carthage, whereupon Rome attained uncontested sovereignty over the ancient world. A century of intermittent civil war later, the Roman republic was no more. Polybius's complete description of Anacyclosis – containing more detail than herein included – proved astoundingly prescient. The republic died as Anacyclosis predicted, succumbing to political faction so violent it could be ended only by a warlord. So indebted was he to these ideas that in retirement John Adams described Polybius's

teachings as “*the Creed of my whole Life*,” a fact which is imprinted on the constitutions of both Massachusetts and the United States.

REFINING THE POLYBIAN NARRATIVE.

Anacyclosis entails two distinct but related processes running in parallel. The first is an external tendency toward territorial expansion, with diverse cities and states swept up into the domain of one political system, culminating in **THE DOMINATION OF ONE HEGEMON OVER MANY NATIONS**. The second is the internal evolutionary cycle just described, culminating in **THE DOMINION OF A SINGLE RULER OVER THE LEADING HEGEMON**. Benefitting from two millennia of additional history, we can supplement Polybius’s original narrative by elaborating the following points:

THE MORE POWERFUL THE REPUBLIC, THE MORE SUSCEPTIBLE TO ANACYCLOSIS.

As states compete for influence and resources in the normal course of human affairs, some leading state inevitably achieves overwhelming dominance within its economic arena, as for instance the Mediterranean Basin was conquered by the Roman republic. Polybius acknowledged this fact but did not elaborate it in detailing the final stages of Anacyclosis:

When a state has weathered many great perils and subsequently attains to supremacy and uncontested sovereignty, it is evident that under the influence of long established prosperity, life becomes more extravagant and the citizens more fierce in their rivalry regarding office and other objects than they ought to be. As these defects go on increasing, the beginning of the change for the worse will be due to love of office and the disgrace entailed by obscurity, as well as to extravagance and purse-proud display ... When this happens, the state will change its name to the finest sounding of all, freedom and democracy, but will change its nature to the worst thing of all, mob rule.

The Roman historian Sallust, likewise witnessing the republic’s final moments first-hand, similarly marked the onset of Roman supremacy as the beginning of the end:

When great kings had been vanquished in war, savage tribes and mighty peoples subdued by force of arms, when Carthage, the rival of Rome’s sway, had perished root and branch, and all seas and lands were open, then Fortune began to grow cruel and to bring confusion into all our affairs.

Just as internal political evolution begins in many fragmented chiefdoms and ends in one consolidated monarchy, international territorial integration begins with many nations and ends in one hegemon. This superpower could be as integrated from a legal, economic, and monetary standpoint as the Roman Empire or the United States, or it could encompass a looser confederation. The essential point, in any case, is the wealthier and more powerful the political system – like Rome and America, both having expanded to the continental scale – the more certain Anacyclosis will run its full course therein. This is further underscored by Machiavelli’s

contribution to the theory of Anacyclosis made during the European Renaissance, noting that many minor republics simply do not endure long enough to complete the cycle:

Such is the circle which all republics are destined to run through. Seldom, however, do they come back to the original form of government, which results from the fact that their duration is not sufficiently long to be able to undergo these repeated changes and preserve their existence. But it may well happen that a republic lacking strength and good counsel in its difficulties becomes subject after a while to some neighboring state, that is better organized than itself; and if such is not the case, then they will be apt to revolve indefinitely in the circle of revolutions.

THE DIFFUSION AND RE-CONCENTRATION OF WEALTH ADVANCES THE SEQUENCE.

With respect to the internal revolutionary cycle through the Greek archetypes, the most important way by which we must supplement Polybius's narrative is explicitly linking the distribution of political power to the distribution of wealth in a political society. His original narrative did not elaborate this connection. Noah Webster, the American Founding Father credited as "The Father of American Scholarship and Education" described this process at work in ancient Rome and premodern Britain:

On reviewing the English history, we observe a progress similar to that in Rome – an incessant struggle for liberty from the date of Magna Charta, in John's reign, to the revolution. The struggle has been successful, by abridging the enormous power of the nobility. But we observe that the power of the people has increased in an exact proportion to their acquisitions of property.

In short, the diffusion of wealth anticipates the diffusion of power. This abstract rule leads to a concrete conclusion to be further considered in our next essay: that an upright and independent middle class is the sine qua non for the emergence of an authentic democracy which is in any meaningful degree responsive to the preferences of the common people.

ANACYCLOSIS REDUX.

Refining Polybius's narrative based on the foregoing, Anacyclosis predicts that every unchecked regime is quickly corrupted or bankrupted and that every corrupt or bankrupt regime is eventually forced to share power with an expanding base of contributors. Thus, political society commences in the primordial conflict of warring tribal chiefdoms, one of which subdues the others and assumes a regal mantle. This royal kingship degenerates into despotic tyranny as the line of kings becomes ever more corrupt or incompetent. Monarchy is eventually forced to share power with the nobility in order to procure its military and fiscal contributions. Aristocracy in turn likewise degenerates into oligarchy. But only where a free middle class is financially entrenched are oligarchs compelled to share power with the people, establishing democracy **ALONGSIDE** oligarchy. So conceived, democracy is ordained when government is made substantially accountable to **AN UPRIGHT AND INDEPENDENT MIDDLE CLASS**, with universal enfranchisement being a later popular demand.

Regardless of how far beyond the middle class the franchise may be thereafter extended, the middle class is inevitably cheated and fleeced by the most ambitious and avaricious economic actors, further corrupting oligarchy into **PLUTOCRACY**. The diminution of the middle classes makes the body politic financially precarious, and therefore responsive to patronage and propaganda. Democracy thereby deteriorates and demagogues are empowered through the agency of middling insecurity, giving rise to ochlocracy (mob-rule), or perhaps more precisely called **DEMAGARCHY** or **DEMAGOGARCHY** (demagogue-rule). Whatever label is given to democracy's end game, an intensifying competition among a narrowing field of popular leaders ultimately elevates a single champion, dragging political society back to some form of monarchy, for a single champion is the outcome of every tournament. Whether that champion is a warrior chief, benevolent king, or a despotic tyrant is an accident of history, depending on the circumstances of his character and attending his elevation. Such is Anacyclosis, comprising the bulk of mankind's political resume.

WHY HISTORY FURNISHES FEW COMPLETE EXAMPLES OF ANACYCLOSIS.

As noted in our prior essay, the speed and extent to which a political system advances through the successive stages of this sequence are determined by its internal distribution of wealth and its security from its neighbors. Due to the uniformity and constancy of human nature, all that a political system requires to complete its full course is sufficient population, resources, security, and time.

But if mankind is indeed spring-loaded for Anacyclosis, why is it not everywhere seen in history? Why for instance do we not see it so clearly in the history of China, or Peru, or Zaire? Why is the full sequence so far mainly, if not solely, seen in Western Europe and North America?

In fact, we do observe the **EARLY** stages everywhere. Ibn Khaldun's five-stage Bedouin dynasty cycle, for example, can be easily reconciled to Anacyclosis's early stages. It is only the **FINAL** stages that are rare. Most of mankind has for most of its history been the subjects of kings and tyrants, nobles and oligarchs. Oligarchy is probably the most persistent condition of mankind, with democracy mainly limited to states adhering to Western Civilization during less than one-tenth of recorded history since the ancient Mesopotamians and Egyptians.

As will be further considered in the next essay, democracy is rare because the emergence of an independent middle class is rare. Until modern times, most societies never advanced as far as democracy. Fewer still developed an authentic democracy whose governments were materially answerable to the middle households. This is because few states ever developed a middle class capable of seriously challenging the elite status quo. As such, the full sequence of Anacyclosis is not everywhere seen because democracy is not everywhere seen, and that because independent middle classes are not everywhere seen.

And, whereas the full sequence of Anacyclosis is not **EVERYWHERE** seen, its full sequence is not **FREQUENTLY** seen because of the vast duration of time required for each iteration to lapse. In a closed system, in a social petri dish, secure from outside interference, Anacyclosis could run its course in mere generations. Various occurrences of chance prolong the sequence by centuries. Indeed, the last time the dual processes of internal revolution and territorial integration converged within a superpower republic, the champion was one Caesar Augustus, and the hegemon was Rome.

Accidents of birth, death, assassination, marriage, military victory and defeat, foreign intervention; of geography, irrigation, weather, agriculture, pestilence, plague; of culture, customs, laws, insurrection, revolt, and every other supervening force majeure: all of these occurrences obstruct, obscure, and obfuscate the process of Anacyclosis. Political evolution is thus subjected to stunted progress, regressions, and varying numbers of stages. But the curvature of history, just as the curvature of the Earth, is clearly perceived from afar no matter how high or low the peaks and valleys. In the end, mankind's preoccupation for higher status, operating relentlessly and under a long lapse of time, averages out all the occurrences of chance, guiding nations through the circular path charted by human nature.

GRACCHUS.