

THE INSTITUTE FOR ANACYCLOSIS

EXCERPT FROM  
METHOD FOR THE EASY COMPREHENSION OF HISTORY  
BY JEAN BODIN

1566 A.D.

*Note: This text begins by recounting the Polybian typology of constitutional forms. Bodin then asserts, consistent with the model of Anacyclosis, that political society on the national scale begins in monarchy and degenerates into tyranny. Bodin then challenges the remainder of the validity of the Anacyclosis model. This excerpt is presented to illustrate this very important point: in discounting the Polybian Anacyclosis, Bodin (likely in reliance on Aristotle) made the same mistake that F. W. Walbank (the greatest historian of Polybius) made in the 20<sup>th</sup> century A.D., who also relied on Aristotle to challenge the validity of Anacyclosis as a model of political evolution; Bodin did not raise the unit of analysis from the level of a city-state or nation-state to that of a world-state as Polybius had done when he first described Anacyclosis in view of the emerging Roman Empire in the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. Polybius lived to see the first truly economically, legally, linguistically, and culturally integrated political entity of global scale in recorded history – the first “closed political system” in the Machiavellian sense. Aristotle’s and Plato’s units of analyses, by contrast, were mere city-states or confederations existing within a sea of rivals and threats; but Aristotle and Plato lived roughly two centuries before Polybius. From the standpoint of evolutionary modeling, Polybius has an authority that Aristotle and Plato cannot match because he had a superior historical vantage point vis-à-vis Rome, which by the time of Polybius had nearly completed the conquest and integration of the Mediterranean basin and eradicated all serious rivals. As Machiavelli had noted in not so many words in his own recounting of Anacyclosis, Anacyclosis requires a “closed system” to run its full course uninterrupted by foreign interference; there has scarcely been any such thing as a “closed system” in world history from the end of the Third Punic War to the end of the Second World War, but in the decades since the latter the process of international integration and assimilation has advanced until diversity of fundamental economic, legal, and social patterns have yielded before increasingly monolithic patterns of life. Soon, Machiavelli’s “closed system” will be upon us which will permit the completion of the internal revolutionary sequence of Anacyclosis without foreign interference. Thus, applying Anacyclosis to the proper unit of analysis is of critical importance to the validity of the model. Additionally, The Institute’s model of Anacyclosis correlates the revolutionary sequence to the diffusion and concentration of wealth, with the earlier stages applied on the national scale and the later stages on the global scale, with the full sequence determined retroactively against whatever nations by chance arose to global domination; Bodin lived too early to witness the diffusion of wealth which produced the middle classes that preceded democracy. To clarify this last point, The Institute’s model of Anacyclosis does not attempt to articulate the full sequence in all nations, but only in those nations which have arisen to global dominance or, in Polybius’ words, “uncontested sovereignty” which of necessity requires retroactive and prospective historical analysis of those dominant cultures which can only be identified mid-sequence; the permutations of political evolution which may exist in a given society not dragged up in the process of integration by dominant cultures may be useful for various ancillary purposes but not for demonstrating the entire sequence of Anacyclosis on the global scale. As for ourselves, living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century A.D., we may look back upon history from the summit of an equitable socioeconomic configuration of political society, or very near to it, in the sense that we experienced the predominance of a large middle class and have lived to see the process of its destruction, but Bodin by comparison lived deep in a valley of socioeconomic evolution, hamstringing his ability to perceive the full patterns of socioeconomic evolution for want of a second example of an advanced state in the sequence other than Rome. Near the end of this excerpt, however, Bodin does note the core point, consistent with Anacyclosis, that simple constitutional forms of the Greek typology tend to degenerate into their perverted cousins. Finally, Bodin noted that the only places that he perceived democracies and*

*aristocracies to emerge were in Europe; this observation is consistent with a fundamental thesis of The Institute, namely, that the organic diffusion of wealth precedes the organic diffusion of power, and the pluvial climate and other geographic advantages of Europe as opposed to Asia and the Americas tend to favor the private accumulation of agricultural surplus without the need for a centralized command agriculture as early emerged in riparian civilizations, a necessity for irrigation where there was little rainfall or where an agricultural surplus could not be feasibly obtained by a class of yeoman farmers. Footnotes in the original text have been omitted.*

## VI. The Type of Government in States

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### Changes in States

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But that charm of life which men derived from their mutual society soon was spoiled by quarrels when, of course, the weak were oppressed by the strong, a tendency attributed by Varro to universal nature:

He who can, demands the more,  
As the great fish eats the lesser and the hawks  
Kill the birds.

To escape, some of the weak and feeble flee to the robust and strong, but others flee to the most just to save themselves from the threatened injury. Hence two kinds of state have arisen – the one established by force, the other by equity. From the second group come the kingdom, the aristocracy, and the democracy; from the former, tyranny, oligarchy, and ochlocracy, which Cicero, when he lacked a Latin word, called tyranny also. But since empires won by crime cannot be retained without justice, the tyrants themselves are forced to cultivate this virtue, not for itself, but for themselves. For this reason the reputation of justice was enhanced. Thereupon men fled to each most just and sagacious citizen, guarding him by interposing their own bodies, lest he should be harmed. Then he ruled the citizens equitably. From this it becomes plain, even if we were not guided by history, that the full liberty of everyone, that is, the power of living as you wish, without laws or authority, has been handed over by the separate citizens to one; and the first kind of state was set up under the rule of one man, who was called judge because he was created so that men might enjoy justice (as Demosthenes wrote was done at the beginning among the Athenians, and Herodotus, among the Medes). For further evidence, in the pages of Homer and Hesiod, the judges are oftener called kings, lords, rules, or even better, shepherds or pastors of the people. These words signify neither authority, nor domination, but care, solicitude, governing, and equity in judging. It is because of this that Ammianus Marcellinus, Book XXIX, reports dominion is nothing but care for the safety of others. Plato wrote, in Book V of the Republic, “Justice and the just way are literally the other fellow’s good, the advantage of the stronger and the ruler.” Many ages before Homer, Minos and Aeacus, who governed great empires, are called simply judges. Likewise, the seventy men who guided the public affairs of the Hebrews were called judges. When the kings had been expelled, the consuls, in turn, were said to be judges. This may be observed in the pages of Livy and of Varro, who introduced the chosen attendant of each consul elect, saying “All citizens, come ye hither to the judges to a meeting by invitation.” It ought not to seem strange that Augustus rendered justice so assiduously that even when ill he gave decisions from his litter, and the other Caesars had cognizance of trifling matters; even now when our kings are consecrated they swear first that they will give impartial justice, so that this seems to be the chief cause of their creation.

The earliest organization of public affairs, then, was monarchical. It was either equitable without laws, established on the justice of the king alone, or inequitable when some very powerful man accompanied by a band of robbers reduced the weak to slavery, as Moses writes about the giants and Nimrod, who they say first forced men into servitude. Then in order that they might retain the power which had been obtained through crime, it was necessary to secure it by equity. All writers of history agree on this one point, that in the beginning no attempt was made to establish governments of the optimates, much less of the people. Kings, moreover, were selected from one family because those who had most power left the rule to their children. Those who had been esteemed for their justice were worshiped, not only living but also dead, and their children were made kings by the people, because it was through that they would be like their parents, as Polybius wrote. But when dominion started to be measured by greed and personal advantage, not by justice, the change from kingdoms into tyrannies followed. Hence developed the quarrels of the powerful, afterwards even of the weak, since they were horribly exploited and tormented by those who ought to have protected them. So it has come about that the more powerful form a conspiracy and overthrow the autocrat, on account of either cruelty, or lust, or both. Because of cruelty Phalaris, Alexander of Phera, Caligula, Nero, Domitian, Vitellius, Commodus, Eccelino of Padua, and John Maria, the tyrant of the Milanese, were overthrown. But more despots were ruined by lust than by cruelty; since the latter holds citizens to their duty and produces fear, the former produces contempt, for the man who cannot control his own desires seems unworthy to rule. Alexander de' Medici, the tyrant of the Florentines, was killed when he tried to commit adultery with the wife of another, and Peisistratus was killed by Harmodius, whose sister he had seduced. For this reason, also, power was snatched from Aloysius, the tyrant of Piacenza, Galleazzo Maria, Roderick, the king of Spain, Tarquin, Sardanapalus, Heliogabalus, Appius Claudius, and innumerable others. Due to hatred of despots, the reward of authority has been given to the leader of the conspirators. Thus Arbaces, having done away with Sardanapalus, seized the kingdom of the Assyrians; each Brutus took the consulship and the army; Louis Gonzaga, the command of the Mantuans, after he had killed Bonacolsi the tyrant. Moreover, experience teaches us that a very just prince follows a most wicked despot. Their fate terrifies others, and they think it base and dangerous to imitate their lives. So Galba, a very good prince, followed Nero; Nerva, Domitian, Alexander, Heliogabalus; Pertinax, Commodus; Gordian, Maximinus. But little by little altering habits turn from the path, until another prince returns to the extremities of vice.

This ceaseless change is characteristic of all monarchies which have ever existed. What first Plato, then Polybius and Cicero, have written about the necessary change to the democratic form and to that of the optimates is false, since the Scythians are reported never to have had an aristocratic or popular form of government, or the southerners, or the Asiatics beyond the Euphrates, or even the Americans. In the middle region only, toward the west, I see democracies and aristocracies. They occur somewhat late, and they have not flourished long. In the end they have developed into legitimate monarchies resembling all nature, except in a very few places. At first the Cretans, then the Carthaginians, afterwards the Athenians and the Spartans brought into all Greece the form of democratic or of aristocratic government. The Sicilians followed them; then Italians, French, and Spanish, finally Germans and Swiss. And this seems to me to be the one reason: since the men of the middle region are born to the management of affairs, as in a former chapter we have pointed out, all think themselves worthy of rule; yet more especially the westerners, who cannot endure a tyrant easily, because they excel the easterners in independence of spirit. For that reason either they force the kings themselves to obey their laws (nothing more divine can be desired) or they drive tyrants from power and establish governments of the people or of the optimates. This is so plain from the reading of histories that it does not need illustration.

### Two Kinds of Change in an Empire

Changes of government are external or internal; it is necessary to make this distinction. External changes are made by foes or by friends. The latter form occurs when the state willingly yields to the rule of another, though no compulsion exists, as when the Milanese, freed from German rule, called Eriprando,

of an Angeran family, to be their leader and submitted to his power, although he had not aspired to the position. Likewise, the Mamelukes, having killed several sultans, put in control of Egypt, Gampso, prince of Caramania, a reluctant foreigner. The Thebans, also, and the Phocians, having set off a colony, yielded to Plato the city they had founded, so that he might determine its form by laws according to his plans. But this rarely happens, since the rule of strangers is endured with difficulty. It often happens, however, that the conquered must submit to the rule of the victor. Thus the popular government of the Athenians was forcibly changed into an aristocracy by the Spartan leader Lysander. The same judgment holds for all.

Similarly, an internal change may be one of two sorts; one without any violence at all, the other by force. The former deflects from the right to the wrong without any effort, because the nature of men is such that they are wont to slip downward into vices. For what is more excellent than the first five years of Nero? What more divine than the youth of Solomon? What more famous than the early period of Caligula? But on the other hand, what end baser? When they have reached the extreme limit of vice, they cannot be recalled thence without the greatest effort. Therefore it happens that a kingdom has almost always been changed without force into a tyranny; aristocracy into oligarchy; democracy into ochlocracy. But the change from a tyranny into a popular form of government always has been violent, that is, the tyrant has been slain. If this man dies without children, which often happens, the optimates usually take over control, fearing lest they should again relapse into tyranny. At first, then, they direct the state with the greatest equity and justice, since the beginnings of their rule are wont to be excellent. But among the optimates, those who have the advantage in friends, or favor, or riches, or glory for brave deeds try to be superior even to magistrate and commands. From this comes an oligarchy, which Cicero translates as faction, since a few encroach by evil arts upon the wealth and honors of the many. Under these circumstances conspiracies arise among the powerful, and they plot murder until the plebs, sickened by the rule of the wicked, easily attack, despoil, and kill those who are disunited among themselves. Thus, when the government of the factions has at last been overthrown, a popular state follows. For the people, having recovered their liberty, allow themselves to be easily persuaded by the speeches of men of their own class that they should enjoy the liberty which they have won.

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