

Aristotle - Philosophy of Politics

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Few people realize the importance of philosophy and its deep impact in everyday life. Like the roots of a tree, or the foundation of a house, it may be invisible or hidden from view; we may not talk of the philosophy behind our actions and thoughts, or of what the real reason or logic behind our thoughts and actions are, but we only need to dig a little under the surface to find the rock bed on which our feet have always been firmly planted. It is only then that we realize what we have taken as a given or for granted all along is a system of thoughts which is, but a philosophy. This applies in everything; even politics.

Aristotle's Politics is a clear expression of what we see today in many governments of the west and it is amazing to see how the city states of the Greek Isles were struggling with many of the same problems governments face today. Aristotle gives us the definitions of six types of governments with three good and three bad. He said, when a single person rules, it is a monarchy if the ruler is good and a tyranny if bad. When a small group of elites rules, it is an aristocracy if the rulers are good and an oligarchy if they are bad. If the masses rule, it is a polity if they rule well and a democracy (mob-rule) if they rule badly. The word democracy in Aristotle's time did not mean what it has come to mean today. So, strictly speaking, the democracy of our time is an attempt towards polity.

These definitions are theories of government, but Aristotle turns from speculations to practical examination of political institutions as they existed among the Greeks. He observed that the needs of city-states vary greatly according to their wealth, population, class distribution, etc. He examined the varieties of states and constitutions and made a number of recommendations. He identified that the greatest tension in any state is the mutual resentment between the rich and the poor. Consequently, he said, a strong middle class would keep a state in balance and would guard against corruption and oppression. How does it do that? The middle class would have a stake in government, and would not side with those who would want to overthrow those in power, but it would also rise in opposition to those in power when gross corruption or injustice takes place in the state.

Aristotle also observed that it is not necessary or even practical to give everyone equal access to public office, but that it is never wise to exclude entirely any group of people from power. Constitutions are usually changed by a large, dissatisfied faction that rises up against the people in power and make revolution. To preserve a constitution, Aristotle recommended: moderation, education, and inclusiveness. The interests of a rich minority and the poor majority can be balanced by allowing both factions somewhat of an equal amount of power. And that gives stability and perpetuity to the state.

To a large extent that seems to be what many "democracies" of the world are trying to do today, but greed is the main cause of instability, corrupting a few at the very top. And all governments need to guard against corruption and move aggressively to root it out and be engaged in a downward wealth distribution so that the poor do not resent the rich. Deep resentment of the poor is the fuel for every violent revolution. **To be continued...**