

Oligarchy

INTRODUCTION

IN the great books of political theory the word "oligarchy" is usually listed along with "monarchy" and "democracy" among the traditional names for the forms of government. According to the meaning of their Greek roots, "oligarchy" signifies the rule of the few as "monarchy" signifies the rule of one and "democracy" the rule of the people—or the many. These verbal meanings are somewhat altered, however, when we consider the actual conflict between oligarchy and democracy in Greek political life. It involved an opposition, not simply between the few and the many, but between the wealthy and the working classes. The contest between these factions for political power dominated more than a century of Greek history around the Periclean age; and that fact justifies Aristotle's remark that oligarchy and democracy are the two principal conflicting forms of government.

We would not so describe the political struggle of our time. We would not speak of oligarchy as one of the principal forms of government in the world today. Instead we tend to think in terms of the conflict between democracy and dictatorship or despotism. Even when we look to the background of present issues, it is the age-old struggle between absolute and constitutional government—or between monarchies and republics—which seems to supply the obvious historical parallels for the contemporary conflict between the principles of arbitrary and legal government. The traditional terms of political theory, with the exception of oligarchy, thus appear to have a certain liveliness in the consideration of current problems. But though it does not have such frequency in our speech or familiarity in our thought, oligarchy may be much

more relevant to the real issues of our day than appears on the surface.

Certainly within the framework of constitutional government oligarchic and democratic principles are the opposed sources of policy and legislation. In modern as in ancient republics the division of men into political parties tends to follow the lines of the division of men into economic factions. The ancient meanings of oligarchy and democracy, especially for those observers like Thucydides and Aristotle who see the rich and the poor as the major rivals for constitutional power, indicate the fusion of political and economic issues.

The difference between oligarchy and democracy, says Aristotle, is not well-defined by reference to the few and the many, unless it is understood that the few are also the rich and the many the poor. The issue is not whether the few are wiser than the many, or whether it is more efficient to have the government in the hands of the few rather than the many. Such issues have been debated in the history of political thought, but they are more appropriate to the alternatives of aristocracy and democracy than to the conflict between oligarchy and democracy.

The historic struggle between oligarchs and democrats—whether described as a struggle between rich and poor, nobility and bourgeoisie, landed gentry and agrarian peons, owners and workers, classes and masses—is a struggle over the political privileges of wealth, the rights of property, the protection of special interests. In the tradition of the great books, Marx and Engels may be the first to call this struggle "the class war," but they are only the most recent in a long line of political and economic writers to recognize that the eco-

conomic antagonism of rich and poor generates the basic political conflict in any state. "Any city, however small," says Socrates, "is in fact divided into two, one the city of the poor, the other of the rich: these are at war with one another."

OLIGARCHY IS NOT always defined as the rule of the wealthy, nor is it always conceived as the opponent of democracy on constitutional questions. In the *Statesman*, for example, Plato first divides the forms of government into "monarchy, the rule of the few, and the rule of the many," and then divides "the rule of the few into aristocracy, which has an auspicious name, and oligarchy." Here aristocracy and oligarchy seem to be regarded as opposites, the one a government in which the few rule according to the laws, the other lawless government by the few. In both, the few are the wealthy; hence wealth is no more characteristic of oligarchy than of aristocracy.

Some political theorists make no reference to wealth at all in the discussion of oligarchy. Hobbes divides the forms of government according to whether the sovereign power is in the hands of one or more; and if in the hands of more than one, then whether it is held by some or all. He calls the several forms of government monarchy (one), aristocracy (some), and democracy (all). There are "other names of government in the histories and books of policy," he adds, such as "tyranny and oligarchy." But they are not the names of other forms of government, but of the same forms disliked. For they that are discontented under monarchy call it *tyranny*, and they that are displeased with aristocracy call it *oligarchy*." Like Hobbes, both Locke and Rousseau use no criterion except numbers to distinguish the forms of government, Locke calling government by the few "oligarchy" and Rousseau calling it "aristocracy."

Barely outlined in this way, the alternatives of monarchy, aristocracy or oligarchy, and democracy seem to raise issues only of expediency or efficiency rather than of justice. Whether oligarchy is intrinsically a good or bad form of government tends to become a question only when other factors are con-

sidered; when, for example, the distinction between aristocracy and oligarchy is made to turn on whether the few are men of virtue or men of property, or when, in the comparison of oligarchy with democracy, the emphasis is not upon numbers but on the principles of wealth and liberty.

Nevertheless, the numerical criterion does not seem to be totally irrelevant to the comparison. "Oligarchy and democracy," Aristotle writes, "are not sufficiently distinguished merely by these two characteristics of wealth and freedom." Though the "real difference between democracy and oligarchy is poverty and wealth," and though "wherever men rule by reason of their wealth, whether they be few or many, that is an oligarchy," Aristotle does not seem to think we can neglect the political significance of what he calls the "accidental fact that the rich everywhere are few, and the poor numerous."

With regard to aristocracy and oligarchy, the chief question does not seem to be one of principle, but of fact. Plato in *The Republic* and Aristotle in the *Politics* define aristocracy as government by the few best men, or the most virtuous. They also place it next to what is for them the ideal government by the supremely wise man—the rule of the philosopher king, or what Aristotle calls "the divine sort of government." In this context, oligarchy represents a perversion of aristocracy, as tyranny represents a corruption of monarchy.

Plato describes oligarchy as arising when "riches and rich men are honored in the State" and when the law "fixes a sum of money as the qualification for citizenship" and allows "no one whose property falls below the amount fixed to have any share in the government." But according to Socrates, wealth does not qualify men to rule, as virtue and wisdom do. "Just think what would happen," he says, "if pilots were to be chosen according to their property, and a poor man were refused permission to steer, even though he were a better pilot." To which Adeimantus agrees that in government, as in navigation, the probable result would be shipwreck.

But though there may be no question of

the superiority of aristocracy over oligarchy in principle, the critics of aristocracy question whether any historic state in which the few hold political power is not in fact an oligarchy. It may not always be the case that the power of the few rests directly on wealth. The privileged class may be a military clique or a hereditary nobility. Yet these distinctions are seldom unaccompanied by the control of land or other forms of wealth, so that indirectly at least the oligarchic factor is thought to be operative.

THE CRITICISM OF aristocracies as masked oligarchies is discussed in the chapter on ARISTOCRACY. The critical point seems to be that nothing except superior virtue or talent justifies a political inequality between the few and the many. The meaning of oligarchy is generalized in consequence to include any government in which the special privileges or powers held by the few cannot be justified, whether it is wealth or some other title to preeminence that is substituted for superiority in virtue or talent. When it is so understood, the word "oligarchical" tends to become like "tyrannical," a term of reproach.

In describing different forms of democracy, Aristotle observes that their common principle is to give a share in the government to all who meet whatever minimum qualification is set by law. "The absolute exclusion of any class," he says, "would be a step towards oligarchy." To the same effect is J. S. Mill's comment on the steps away from oligarchy accomplished by English constitutional reforms in the 19th century.

"In times not long gone by," Mill writes, "the higher and richer classes were in complete possession of the government . . . A vote given in opposition to those influences . . . was almost sure to be a good vote, for it was a vote against the monster evil, the over-ruling influence of oligarchy." But now that the higher classes are no longer masters of the country, now that the franchise has been extended to the middle classes, a diminished form of oligarchy still remains. "The electors themselves are becoming the oligarchy"—in a population where many are still disfranchised. "The present electors," Mill continues, "and the bulk of

those whom any probable Reform Bill would add to the number, are the middle class; and have as much a class interest, distinct from the working classes, as landlords or great manufacturers. Were the suffrage extended to all skilled laborers, even those would, or might, still have a class interest distinct from the unskilled."

Oligarchy remains, according to Mill, so long as there is any unjustifiable discrimination among classes in the population. It is not in his view limited to discrimination based on the extremes of wealth and poverty, as he plainly indicates by his remarks on the special interests of different parts of the working class, or their relation as a whole to the lower middle classes. He makes this even plainer by what he has to say on political discrimination as between the sexes. Suppose the suffrage to be extended to all men, he writes, "suppose that what was formerly called by the misapplied name of universal suffrage, and now by the silly title of manhood suffrage, became the law; the voters would still have a class interest, as distinguished from women."

The oligarchic defect in representative government which Mill is here criticizing seems to have little or no basis in economic class divisions. The exclusion of any class in the population from a voice in government renders that government oligarchic with respect to them. The excluded class may even be a minority. So conceived, oligarchy no longer means the rule of either the rich or the few.

When the meaning of oligarchy is generalized in this way, the discussion of oligarchy seems to presuppose the typically modern conception of democracy. As indicated in the chapter on DEMOCRACY, the distinguishing feature of the modern democratic constitution is universal suffrage. By this criterion, the conflict between the democrats and the oligarchs of the ancient world appears to be a conflict between two forms of the oligarchic constitution—one in which the wealthier few and one in which the poorer many have political rights, but in neither of which membership in the political community includes all normal adult human beings in the population.

Where ancient political theory could con-

ceive of a mixed constitution—somehow combining oligarchic and democratic principles—the modern conception of democracy seems to make any compromise with oligarchy impossible. Certain modern writers, notably Gaetano Mosca, Robert Michels, and Vilfredo Pareto, seem to insist, on the contrary, that oligarchy is present in all forms of government, and is especially prevalent in representative democracies where the actual conduct of government—the effective power—is in the hands of a bureaucracy or an elite, whether popularly chosen or self-appointed. But the contradiction may be more verbal than real if on one side the word “oligarchy” means some degree of restriction in the franchise or citizenship, and, on the other, it applies to any situation in which the whole people are not directly active in all the affairs of government and, consequently, a small number of men administers the state. Understood in the latter sense, the oligarchic principle does not seem to be incompatible with representative democracy. Those who use the word in this sense merely call attention to an inevitable characteristic of representative government. A representative democracy may also have an aristocratic aspect when it follows the principle that the men best qualified by virtue or talent for public office should be chosen by the suffrage of all their fellow citizens.

Tocqueville seems to express this point when he says, “Our contemporaries are ever a prey to two conflicting passions: they feel the need of guidance, and they long to stay free. Unable to wipe out these two contradictory instincts, they try to satisfy them both together. Their imagination conceives a government which is unitary, protective, and all-powerful, but elected by the people . . . Under this system the citizens quit their state of dependence just long enough to choose their masters and then fall back into it.”

FULLER DISCUSSION of these aspects of oligarchy is found in the chapters on ARISTOCRACY and DEMOCRACY. Here we are primarily concerned with political issues which have their source in the opposition of economic classes in the state, primarily that extreme divi-

sion of men into those who live by their labor and those who live on their property and the labor of others. It is in terms of this extreme division between men of leisure and workingmen that the conflict between oligarchy and democracy takes place in the ancient world.

At a time when citizenship meant a much more active and frequent participation in government than it does under the modern institutions of the ballot box and the representative assembly, the ancient defenders of oligarchy could argue that only men of wealth had the leisure requisite for citizenship. Oligarchy could be further defended on the ground that, in many of the Greek city-states, public officials were either not compensated at all or at least not substantially. Only men of sizable property could afford to hold public office.

Aristotle weighs the arguments for and against oligarchy. On the point of leisure, for example, he holds that “nothing is more absolutely necessary than to provide that the highest class, not only when in office, but when out of office, should have leisure.” Yet “even if you must have regard to wealth in order to secure leisure,” it is “surely a bad thing,” he thinks, “that the greatest offices, such as those of kings and generals, should be bought. The law which allows this abuse makes wealth of more account than virtue.”

Aristotle seems to regard democratic and oligarchic claims as complementary half-truths. “Both parties to the argument,” he says, “are speaking of a limited and partial justice, but imagine themselves to be speaking of absolute justice.” According to an adequate conception of political justice, it is as unjust to treat equals unequally as it is to treat unequals equally. The oligarch violates the first of these principles, the democrat the second. “Democracy arises out of the notion that those who are equal in any respect are equal in all respects; because men are equally free, they claim to be absolutely equal. Oligarchy is based on the notion that those who are unequal in one respect are in all respects unequal; being unequal, that is, in property, they suppose themselves to be unequal absolutely.”

Both forms of government have “a kind of justice, but, tried by an absolute standard, they

are faulty; and, therefore, both parties, whenever their share in the government does not accord with their preconceived ideas, stir up revolution . . . In oligarchies the masses make revolution under the idea that they are unjustly treated, because . . . they are equals and have not an equal share; and in democracies, the notables revolt, because they are not equal, and yet have only an equal share."

What can cure this situation in which perpetual revolution seems to be inevitable, as democracy succeeds oligarchy, or oligarchy democracy, in the government of the Greek cities? Aristotle describes many forms of oligarchy and democracy, but none seems to remove the cause of revolution. When, in an attempt to preserve their position, the wealthier families turn to the more extreme forms of oligarchic constitution, that tendency eventually leads to a kind of despotic government which Aristotle calls "dynasty," or the lawless rule of powerful families.

To establish a stable government which shall be less subject to revolution in favor of a contrary principle of government, and which shall resist the tendency toward lawless rule, by either the masses or the powerful few, Aristotle proposes the mixed constitution, which shall combine the elements of both democratic and oligarchic justice. But this will not work in actual practice, he thinks, unless the middle class "is large, and stronger if possible than both the other classes . . . Great then is the good fortune of a state in which the citizens have a moderate and sufficient property; for where some possess much, and the others nothing, there may arise an extreme democracy, or a pure oligarchy; or a tyranny may grow out of either extreme . . . These considerations will help us to understand why most governments are either democratical or oligarchical. The reason is that the middle class is seldom numerous in them, and whichever party, whether the rich or the common people, transgresses the mean and predominates, draws the constitution its own way, and thus arises either oligarchy or democracy."

From the point of view which sees no justice in granting any special privileges to property, Aristotle's position on oligarchy seems

open to question. For one thing, in admitting a partial justice in the principle that those who are unequal in wealth should be treated unequally in the distribution of political power, Aristotle appears to affirm that the possessors of wealth *deserve* a special political status. For another thing, in his own formulation of an ideal polity, Aristotle advocates the exclusion of the working classes from citizenship. "The citizens must not lead the life of mechanics or tradesmen, for such a life is ignoble and inimical to virtue. Neither must they be husbandmen, since leisure is necessary both for the development of virtue and the performance of political duties." All these classes of men are necessary for the existence of the state, but they are to be no part of it in the sense of political membership. "The best form of state will not admit them to citizenship," though it will include as necessary "the slaves who minister to the wants of individuals, or mechanics and laborers who are the servants of the community."

Some of the great speeches in Thucydides' *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, which deal with domestic issues as well as the issues of war and peace, eloquently argue the opposite side of the case. Debating with Hermocrates before the Syracusan assembly, Athenagoras answers those who say that "democracy is neither wise nor equitable, but that the holders of property are the best fitted to rule. I say, on the contrary, first, that the word *demos*, or people, includes the whole state, oligarchy only a part; next, that if the best guardians of property are the rich, and the best counsellors the wise, none can hear and decide so well as the many, and that all these talents, severally and collectively, have their just place in a democracy. But an oligarchy gives the many their share of the danger, and not content with the largest part, takes and keeps the whole of the profit."

IN MODERN POLITICAL thought, the discussion of oligarchy seems to occur on two levels. There is a controversy on the level of constitutional principles with regard to suffrage and representation and the qualifications for public office. Here the issues concern the jus-

tice of the fundamental laws of republican or popular government. There is also a consideration of the way in which men of property or corporate concentrations of wealth are able to exert influence upon the actual course of government. Here the problem becomes, not so much the justice of the constitution or of the laws, but the weight which wealth seems able to throw onto the scales of justice.

The great modern defense of the oligarchic constitution does not seem to be as plainly or forcefully made in any of the great books as in the speeches of Edmund Burke, especially those in opposition to the suffrage reform measures proposed by Charles James Fox, wherein Burke argues for the principle of *virtual* representation. It is unnecessary, he claims, for the franchise to be extended to the working classes if their economic betters—who also happen to be their superiors in talent and education—deliberate on what is for the common good of all.

The Federalists seem to take an opposite view. Reflecting on the system of British representation in their day, they observe that, for the eight millions of people in the kingdoms of England and Scotland, “the representatives . . . in the House of Commons amount to five hundred and fifty-eight.” But, they go on, “of this number one ninth are elected by three hundred and sixty-four persons and one half by five thousand seven hundred and twenty-three persons. It cannot be supposed,” they argue, “that the half thus elected and who do not even reside among the people at large, can add anything either to the security of the people against the government, or to the knowledge of their circumstances and interests in the legislative councils. On the contrary, it is notorious that they are more frequently the representatives and instruments of the executive magistrate than the guardians and advocates of the popular rights.” Nevertheless, they do not condemn such an oligarchic system of representation as entirely inimical to the virtues of parliamentary government. “It is very certain,” they declare, “not only that a valuable portion of freedom has been preserved under all these circumstances, but that the defects in the British code are chargeable, in a very small

proportion, on the ignorance of the legislature concerning the circumstances of the people.”

Some of the American constitutionalists may be influenced by Burke’s defense of oligarchy in terms of the virtues of an aristocracy, but they state their own position in terms which are more plainly oligarchic. They argue for poll tax clauses and property qualifications for public office on the ground that the country should be run by the people who own it. Furthermore, those who are not economically independent are not in a position to exercise political liberty. “Power over a man’s subsistence,” Hamilton declares, “amounts to power over his will.”

Facing the issue which had been raised on the floor of the constitutional convention, Madison remarks that “the most common and durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property. Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society.” He proposes a representative—or what he calls a “republican”—system of government to avoid the excessive factionalism of the pure or direct democracies of Greek city-states.

“Theoretic politicians, who have patronized this species of government,” Madison writes, “have erroneously supposed that by reducing mankind to perfect equality in their political rights, they would, at the same time, be perfectly equalized and assimilated in their possessions, their opinions, and their passions.” By a weighted system of representation, the power of sheer numbers may be counterbalanced by the power given to other factors, thus preventing the “accomplishment of the secret wishes of an unjust and interested majority . . . A rage for paper money, for an abolition of debts, for an equal division of property, or for any other improper or wicked project, will be less apt to pervade the whole body of the Union than a particular member of it.”

In another paper, the Federalists answer the charge that the constitution is oligarchic, because “the House of Representatives . . . will be taken from that class of citizens which will have least sympathy with the mass of the people and be most likely to aim at an ambitious sacrifice of the many to the aggrandizement of

the few." This objection, they say, while "lev-
eled against a pretended oligarchy," in prin-
ciple "strikes at the very root of republican
government."

The method of election provided for by the
Constitution aims "to obtain for rulers men
who possess most wisdom to discern, and
most virtue to pursue, the common good of
the society . . . Who are to be the electors of
the federal representatives? Not the rich, more
than the poor; not the learned, more than
the ignorant; not the haughty heirs of distin-
guished names, more than the humble sons of
obscurity and unpropitious fortune . . . Who
are to be the objects of popular choice? Every
citizen whose merit may recommend him to
the esteem and confidence of the country. No
qualification of wealth, of birth, of religious
faith, or of civil profession, is permitted to fet-
ter the judgment or disappoint the inclination
of the people."

WHETHER THE AMERICAN Constitution in its
original formulation is an oligarchic document
has long been a matter of dispute. Whether
the Federalists favor devices for protecting the
rights of property or repudiate oligarchic re-
strictions in favor of the rights of man has
also been the subject of controversy. That this
is so may indicate at least a certain ambiguity
in their position. But on the question of the
oligarchic influences on government—the po-
litical pressures exerted by propertied classes
to serve their special interests—the opinion of
the modern authors of the great books seems
much clearer.

The most extreme statement of this opinion
is, of course, to be found in the *Manifesto of
the Communist Party*. There government, in
fact the state itself, is regarded as an instru-
ment which the economic oppressors wield
against the oppressed. The final step in the
bourgeois revolution, according to Marx and
Engels, occurred when the bourgeoisie "con-
quered for itself, in the modern representative
State, exclusive political sway." In the bour-

geois state, legislation is nothing but the will
of this one class made into a law for all. One
aim of the communist revolution, beyond the
temporary dictatorship of the proletariat, is
the withering away of that historic formation
of the state in which "political power . . . is
merely the organized power of one class for
oppressing another."

Though much less radical in intention than
Marx, Adam Smith and J. S. Mill make state-
ments which seem to be no less radical in
their criticism of the oligarchic influences on
modern parliamentary government. It has been
said, Smith observes, that "we rarely hear . . .
of combinations of masters, though frequently
of those of workmen. But whoever imagines,
upon this account, that masters rarely com-
bine, is as ignorant of the world as of the
subject. Masters are always and everywhere in
a sort of tacit, but constant and uniform com-
bination, not to raise the wages of labor above
their actual rate . . . Masters too sometimes
enter into particular combinations to sink the
wages of labor even below this rate." Further-
more, the parties to the conflict do not have
equal access to legislative protection. "When-
ever the legislature attempts to regulate the
differences between masters and their work-
men, its counsellors are always the masters."

Almost a century later, Mill writes in a sim-
ilar vein concerning "the persevering attempts
so long made to keep down wages by law
. . . Does Parliament," he asks, "ever for an
instant look at any question with the eyes of a
working man? . . . On the question of strikes,
for instance, it is doubtful if there is so much
as one among the leading members of either
House who is not firmly convinced that the
reason of the matter is unqualifiedly on the
side of the masters, and that the men's view of
it is simply absurd." The remedy for this in-
equity, according to Mill, is not communism,
but constitutional reforms in the direction of
universal suffrage which will no longer leave
the working classes "excluded from all direct
participation in the government."