

CHAPTER I.

THE CLASSIFICATION OF CONSTITUTIONS: THE CLAIMS
AND CHARACTER OF OLIGARCHY.§ 1. *The Popular Classification of Constitutions.*

THE genius of the Greeks, which has given them a sure and lasting preeminence as political inventors and political theorists, made them conscious at a comparatively early date of the variety of governments under which they lived. The ruling element, as Aristotle says, must be one man, or a few men, or the multitude¹: and this distinction, which has served ever since as the basis of classification, is recorded for the first time by Pindar in language that is neither technical nor precise². In his words ‘tyranny, the ravening host and the wise wardens of the city’ denote monarchy, democracy and oligarchy: and the poet reveals his preference for the government of the few by the choice of the epithets that he employs³. Thus from

¹ *Pol.* iii 6 1279 a 25 πολιτευμα δ' ἐστὶ τὸ κύριον τῶν πόλεων, ἀνάγκη δ' εἶναι κύριον ἢ ἓνα ἢ ὀλίγους ἢ τοὺς πολλούς.

² *Pyth.* 2 86 ἐν πάντα δὲ νόμον.... | παρὰ τυραννίδι, χῶπτόταν ὁ λάβρος στρατός, | χῶπταν πόλιν οἱ σοφοὶ τηρέωντι. *Homer Il.* ii 204 οὐκ ἀγαθὸν πολυκοιρανίῃ εἰς κοίρανος ἔστω, gives us the first reflection on Politics.

³ The political application of the commonest moral epithets is found in *Theognis*, although he does not expressly moralize on forms of government.

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the first we find constitutional forms and political parties described in moral terms, and this tendency did much to confuse the political terminology of the Greeks⁴. The use of such terms could never be altogether consistent, for the advocates of oligarchy and democracy used identical phrases of praise and abuse, and applied them, as might suit their purpose or occasion, to describe opposite parties and different forms of government⁵.

There is no rhetorical commonplace so constantly employed as the comparison of the three constitutions or the contrast of the principles of oligarchy and democracy: it was a universal topic with the rhetors and sophists, who taught their pupils the stock descriptions of each constitution, and directed them to adapt their epithets and suit their conclusions to the taste of their audience⁶. By the time of Herodotus this criticism of constitutions was already in fashion, and the scientific terms of monarchy, oligarchy and democracy had been introduced⁷. The his-

⁴ It will be seen below how inconsistent and ambiguous the use of many political terms is.

⁵ It would be beside my purpose to discuss this subject here: but there is abundant evidence in the orators that the epithets and qualities, which are supposed to have acquired a special political application in the mouths of oligarchs, were employed in an absolutely opposite way by speakers wishing to say pleasant things to a democracy. Instances could be quoted of *εὐνομία*, *εὐταξία* and *σωφροσύνη* (the particular virtues of oligarchies) attributed to the democratic constitution: while *πονηρία*, *μοχθηρία*, *ὑβρις* and the like are supposed to be innate characteristics of oligarchy.

⁶ Examples of this practice are quoted in the text: it is described in Isocr. xii 111 *τοὺς τοιοῦτους ἐπειδὴν αἰσθωνταὶ τοὺς τόπους προκατειλημένους...ἐπὶ τὸν λόγον οἶμαι τρέψεσθαι τὸν περὶ τῶν πολιτειῶν*.

⁷ Thus *μοναρχίη*, *τυραννίς*, *ὀλιγαρχίη* occur in the debate in iii 80—82. He uses *δημος* there to describe democracy: but in vi 43 *δημοκρατίη* is found.

torian could not deny himself the pleasure of discussing the question, which was then, perhaps for the first time, agitating the minds of the Greeks, the question of the best form of government⁸. The debate, attributed with a grotesque inappropriateness to the three Persian nobles, is nothing else than a representation of Hellenic institutions and a reflection of Hellenic ideas⁹. We find that Herodotus introduces moral qualities in his definitions¹⁰, but they show a considerable power of scientific analysis and include many of the characteristics essential to the three constitutions¹¹.

Thucydides as far outstrips Herodotus in the science of politics as in the art of history. He invented for himself the canons of his art and the principles of his philosophy, and having no predecessor he may have unconsciously formed the design of his work on the model of the Greek drama. Thus the narrative, which we may liken to the recitals of the messengers or the other episodes of tragedy, is interrupted, while the orator performing the function of the chorus introduces into the discussion of

⁸ Cf. Newman, *Introduction* p. 85. 'The quest of 'a best constitution' was a tradition of political inquiry in Greece. The question was apparently first raised by practical statesmen, and it was thus perhaps that Herodotus came to imagine a group of Persian grandees discussing the claims of monarchy, oligarchy and democracy.'

⁹ The debate, as a whole, is unreal and impossible, but the characteristics attributed to the constitutions are entirely Greek and un-Oriental.

¹⁰ Thus *ὀλιγαρχία* is defined as *ἀνδρῶν ἀρίστων ὁμιλία* (practically Aristotle's definition of *ἀριστοκρατία*): *κακότης* is regarded by Darius as inevitable in a democratic government.

¹¹ Thus *ἰσονομία* (cf. Thuc. iii 82) is attributed to democracy, and Otanes says of it *πάλλω μὲν ἀρχὰς ἄρχει, ὑπεύθυνον δὲ ἀρχὴν ἔχει, βουλευματα δὲ πάντα ἐς τὸ κοινὸν ἀναφέρει*. The description of tyranny is thoroughly in accord with Greek sentiment.

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particular events the searching analysis of motive, the masterly application of general principles, which make Thucydides an author for all time¹². In the speeches, moreover, there is a tragic irony, a foreknowledge of the catastrophe which reminds us again of the analogy. The splendid panegyric of Athens put into the mouth of Pericles is followed without a break by the narrative of the plague—the first step in the downfall of Athens. The assertion of the empire of force at Melos and the warnings of the Melian speakers prepare the way for that masterpiece of tragic narrative, the story of the disaster in Sicily. Hence though the speeches are often not inconsistent with the character of the speaker and are appropriate enough to the circumstances of the occasion¹³, they may be regarded rather as containing the reflections of Thucydides himself than as the actual words or thoughts of the orator to whom they are attributed. Thucydides is nowhere concerned with the comparison of the three constitutions, but he shows that he has carried the analysis of constitutional forms much further than his predecessors. His classification is more accurate, varieties of the main types are distinguished¹⁴, and the characteristics of the different governments are drawn in more detail and with greater precision¹⁵.

¹² Thucydides rarely inserts his own comment on events. The most noteworthy instance is the reflection on the *στάσις* at Coreyra (iii 82—3).

¹³ Thucydides himself says (i 22) *ὡς δ' ἂν ἐδόκουν ἕμολ ἕκαστοι περὶ τῶν ἀεὶ παρόντων τὰ δέοντα μάλιστ' εἰπεῖν, ἐχομένῳ ὅτι ἐγγύτατα τῆς ξυμπάσης γνώμης τῶν ἀληθῶς λεχθέντων, οὕτως εἴρηται.*

¹⁴ In i 13 *τυραννίδες* and *πατρικαὶ βασιλείαι* are distinguished. In iii 62 *ὀλιγαρχία ἰσόνομος* and *δυναστεία* are distinguished.

¹⁵ Cf. the descriptions of the Athenian democracy (ii 38) and of the moderate democracy at Syracuse (vi 39).

In these respects he anticipates Aristotle, and it is clear that the philosopher to a great extent follows the historian both in his phraseology and in his general descriptions. To Thucydides the Peloponnesian war was a conflict of political principles, a duel between oligarchy and democracy¹⁶: it was even more particularly a trial of strength between the free and popular constitution of Athens and the rigid, military aristocracy of Sparta. Hence he is haunted by the antithesis afforded by these two states; and it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that there are few speeches in which traces of this antithesis cannot be found, while it is emphasized or implied on occasions when the introduction of the contrast is inappropriate to the speaker and irrelevant¹⁷.

To continue the examination of the popular classification: Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic* refers to the three ordinary constitutions under the names of tyranny, aristocracy and democracy¹⁸. Isocrates enumerates them and further differentiates them by their ethical qualities—a distinction to which I refer below¹⁹. Aeschines introduces the comparison in order to draw conclusions in favour of the fairness and good order of democracy²⁰. Demosthenes

¹⁶ Cf. especially iii 82 1.

¹⁷ The contrast of the character of the two states is natural and avowed in the speech of the Corinthians (i 68—71) and in that of Archidamus (i 80—85). In the praise of Athens by Pericles Sparta serves as a foil to her great rival (ii 35 ff., see especially chapters 37, 39, 40). The contrast does not seem so relevant in the mouth of Cleon (iii 37—40), but it is obviously implied though not avowed; for Cleon is made to repeat the description of the Spartans given by the Corinthians and Archidamus. Lastly, the comparison is made by Nicias (vi 11).

¹⁸ i 338 D.

¹⁹ xii 132—3. [Lys.] vi 30 enumerates δῆμος, ὀλιγαρχία and τύραννος.

²⁰ In *Timarch.* 4.

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mentions all three forms and has much to say about the relative merits of democracy and oligarchy²¹.

These instances suffice to show that the threefold division of constitutions was generally accepted.

§ 2. *Classification of Constitutions by the Philosophers.*

The sophistic movement gave a great impetus to the criticism of constitutional forms, and the philosophers also devoted no little interest to the study of politics. The theory of Socrates is preserved for us in the pages of Xenophon, the most faithful exponent of his master's teaching¹. Plato has different schemes in the *Republic*, the *Politicus* and the *Laws*², and Aristotle in three passages discusses the classification of constitutions³. Of later writers Polybius⁴, Plutarch⁵ and Dion Chrysostom⁶ follow Aristotle in the main, with some variation of phraseology. All these writers, while distinguishing constitutions by the number of those to whom sovereign power is entrusted, recognise more than three varieties; and their classifica-

²¹ The three forms are enumerated in xxiii 66. The orator offers us a good instance of the commonplace contrast of oligarchy and democracy, for a somewhat frigid passage in which the two forms are compared occurs both in xxii 51—2 and xxiv 163—4.

¹ *Mem.* iv 6 12.

² *Rep.* v 449 A; *Pol.* 291 ff.; *Laws*, 710 E.

³ The scheme in the *Rhetoric* (i 8 1365) has a great resemblance to the scheme in Xenophon, while it differs considerably from that in the *Politics* (iii chs. 6—9), wherein Aristotle adopts in the main the classification of Plato in the *Politicus*. There is a third scheme in the *Ethics* (viii 12 1160) resembling the classification of the *Politics* with some slight variations in the definitions.

⁴ vi chs. 3—10.

⁵ *De unius dom.* 3.

⁶ iii 45—9.

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tion, in so far as it differs from the popular theory, is based primarily on ethical considerations. The classifications of Plato and Aristotle must be discussed in some detail. The speculations of both writers are intimately connected with attempts to construct ideal states on the Greek model. Both of them observed the conditions that prevailed in the ordinary Greek communities; neither of them conceived of anything beyond the city-state. Even Plato's *Republic*, however impossible of realisation, does but depict the government of philosophers on the basis of the Lacedaemonian state⁷. Hence we may often discern real institutions underlying the ideal, and the Utopias of Plato and Aristotle, in so far as they reflect the political theory of the Greeks, have their value in the study of actual constitutions. At the same time the introduction of the ideal state, as the end of political enquiry, tended to divorce the classification of ordinary states from reality.

To Plato 'the ideal view of politics probably seemed the only view worth taking. Politics is to him a more concrete sort of Ethics⁸' and 'the construction of the ideal state is to him more or less an episode in an ethical inquiry⁹.' The ideal state of the *Republic* embodies a constitution for Mars or Saturn, or, as Plato himself says, 'it exists nowhere on earth, but a pattern of it is laid up in heaven¹⁰'; 'it is suited only for gods or the sons of gods¹¹.' Real constitutions, when compared with this political paradise, can only appear ludicrous perversions of justice, and they are estimated fancifully enough in their

⁷ Jowett, *Plato*², v p. xxxviii.

⁸ Newman, *Introduction* p. 486.

⁹ *Ib.* p. 455.

¹⁰ *Rep.* ix 592 A, B.

¹¹ *Laws*, v 739 D; ix 853 c.

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supposed order of deviation from the ideal. Thus 'the government of honour,' the description of which is based on the Cretan and Lacedaemonian states, ranks first of the perversions¹²: next comes oligarchy, the government of wealth, 'laden with divers evils¹³,' and below these are democracy and tyranny. No attempt is made to distinguish the better forms of these constitutions from the worse: all are included in the condemnation.

In the *Laws*, a work written in all probability within the last ten years of Plato's life, when he had realised the hopeless impossibility of his ideal, we have his final thoughts on politics¹⁴. His classification of ordinary governments is not so clear as in the *Republic*. In one passage monarchy and democracy are ranked as 'mother forms' above other constitutions¹⁵: in another passage the rule of a perfect tyrant is said to be best¹⁶, and existing governments are considered, according as they are capable of being transformed into this form¹⁷. He thus ranks them in the order of tyranny, monarchy, democracy and oligarchy. It seems that Plato had really changed his opinion of democracy and now set it above oligarchy, but he is still in irreconcilable hostility to ordinary forms of government. They do not deserve the names of 'constitutions,' they are factions governing without justice in the interest of the rulers¹⁸. The state that is to remedy the prevailing defects, if less ideal than the state of the *Republic*, is not more possible¹⁹. It is a government of

¹² *Rep.* viii 547—8.

¹³ *Ib.* 544 A. It is described in 550 c.

¹⁴ Newman, *Introduction* p. 434, n. 2.

¹⁵ iii 693 D.

¹⁶ iv 709 E.

¹⁷ iv 710 E.

¹⁸ iv 715 B.

¹⁹ See Jowett, *Plato*², v p. xxxvii.

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mixed aristocratic and democratic elements, but Plato cannot overcome his distrust of the people. He wishes to give the control of the government to a few wise men, and to leave to the multitude only such a semblance of power as shall soothe their discontent and prevent them from being dangerous.

Plato's description of actual constitutions in the *Politicus* is incidentally introduced to show how worthless they are in comparison with the rule of the perfect statesman. His enumeration is therefore intended to be complete, and it is certainly based on far more scientific principles than the classification in either of the other works. Starting with the criterion of number²⁰ he adds the ideas of force and consent (already mentioned in Xenophon's definition of monarchy²¹), of poverty and wealth²², of lawlessness and respect for law²³. These principles serve to divide constitutions into kingship and tyranny, aristocracy and oligarchy, and the two forms of democracy, both described by one name. Of these six governments monarchy and aristocracy have the first place, then come the two democracies, lastly oligarchy and tyranny. In the *Politicus*, as in the *Laws*, the philosopher deviates from the order of the *Republic* and gives a preference to democracy over oligarchy.

Plato, then, adopting the popular classification, adds certain ethical considerations, which serve to divide the better forms of each type from the worse.

²⁰ 291 D (μοναρχία, ἡ ὑπὸ τῶν ὀλίγων δυναστεία, ἡ τοῦ πλήθους ἀρχή).

²¹ *Mem.* iv 6 12 βασιλεία is ἐκόντων τῶν ἀνθρώπων καὶ κατὰ νόμους; τυραννίς is the opposite.

²² It is not easy to see how poverty or wealth would serve to differentiate one kind of democracy from another.

²³ This principle also appears in Xenophon, *l. c.*

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Aristotle followed Plato in the division of constitutions into six main forms. In the *Rhetoric* and the *Ethics* the discussion of the subject is incidental and subordinate to the main topic, and we may accept the scheme in the *Politics* as representing the more accurate and the more mature thought of the philosopher; the definitions in the other works we need only discuss in so far as they differ. In the *Rhetoric*—the earliest of the three works—where he argues that the orator must take into account the *ἔθη καὶ νόμιμα* of the constitution, he practically adopts the classification of Socrates as it is recorded by Xenophon²⁴. Besides the double forms of monarchy and oligarchy he only mentions one form of democracy and defines it somewhat arbitrarily as ‘the government in which office is assigned by lot.’ In the *Ethics*²⁵, where he discusses varieties of friendship, the six forms of government are mentioned with the titles they bear in the *Politics*²⁶, but with slight variations in the definition. The principles of classification, finally adopted by him, lead him to distinguish three ‘normal constitutions’ and three ‘perversions’ or ‘corruptions’²⁷.

The perversion is distinguished from the normal type by a difference of end. In the perversion the rulers rule

²⁴ *Rhet.* i 8 1365. The definition of ἀριστοκρατία corresponds to that given by Xenophon (*Mem.* iv 6 12). I discuss it below § 6.

²⁵ viii 12 1160. The definition of πολιτεία as τιμοκρατική differs from the definition of the *Politics*. See below § 5.

²⁶ iii chs. 6—9.

²⁷ Cf. *Eth.* i. c. πολιτείας δ’ ἐστὶν εἶδη τρία, ἴσαι δὲ καὶ παρεκβάσεις, οἷον φθοραὶ τούτων. The idea of the ‘normal’ and the ‘perverted’ constitutions had been already suggested by Plato, though he regards all *actual* constitutions as perversions, in comparison with the ideal. Cf. *Rep.* v 449 A ὀρθὴ πολιτεία and ἡμαρτημένα; *Polit.* 302 B; *Laws* iv 714 B.