

ARISTOTLE, Politics: Democracy (ca. 340 B.C.E.)

Aristotle (384-B.C.E.), a student of Plato, is one of the most important philosophers in Western civilization in the Middle Ages; he was known simply as "The Philosopher." His extensive body of work attempts to classify and study all things known to exist, but he was particularly well known for his ideas about science, ethics, and politics. Politics explains the types of states that exist as well as their merits and shortfalls. In the passage that follows, he considers which kind of state is best.

We have now to inquire what is the best constitution for most states and the best life for most men, neither assuming a standard of virtue that is above ordinary persons, nor an education which is exceptionally favored by nature and circumstances, nor yet an ideal state which is an aspiration only, but having regard to the life in which the majority are able to share, and to the form of government which states, in general, can attain...

Now, in all states, there are three elements: one class is very rich, another very poor, and a third is a mean.¹ It is admitted that moderation and the mean are best, and therefore, it will clearly be best to possess the gifts of fortune in moderation, for in that condition of life, men are most ready to follow rational principles. But he who greatly excels in beauty, strength, birth, or wealth, or on the other hand who is very poor, or very weak, or very much disgraced, finds it difficult to follow rational principle. Of these two, one sort grows into violent and great criminals, the others into rogues and petty rascals. And two sorts of offenses correspond to them, the one committed from violence, the other from roguery. Again, the middle class is least likely to shrink from the rule or to be over-ambitious about it, both of which are injuries to the state. Again, those who have too much of the goods of fortune, strength, wealth, friends, and the like are neither willing nor able to submit to authority. The evil begins at home, for when they are boys, because of the luxury in which they are brought up, they never learn, even at school, the habit of obedience. On the other hand, the very poor, who are in the opposite extreme, are too degraded.

So, the one class cannot obey and can only rule despotically; the other class does not know how to command and must be ruled like slaves. Thus arises a city, not of freemen, but of masters and slaves, the one despising, the other envying; and nothing can be more fatal to friendship and good fellowship in states than this: for good fellowship springs from friendship; when men are at enmity with one another, they would rather not even share the same path. But a city ought to be composed, as far as possible, of equals and similars, and these are generally the middle classes...

Thus, it is manifest that the best political community is formed by citizens of the middle class and that those states are likely to be well-administered in which the middle class is large and stronger, if possible, than both the other classes or at any rate than either singly; for the addition of the middle class turns the scale, and prevents either of the extremes from being dominant. 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—either

out of the most rampant democracy, or out of an oligarchy; but it is not so likely to arise out of the middle constitutions and those akin to them...

These considerations will help us to understand why most governments are either democratical or oligarchical. The reason is that the middle class is sel-dom 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. There is another reason why the poor and the rich quarrel with one another, and whichever side gets the better, instead of establishing a just or popular government, regards political suprem-acy as the prize of victory.

The one party sets up a democracy and the other an oligarchy. Further, both the parties that had supremacy in Hellas looked only to the interest of their own form of government and established in states, the one, democracies, and the other, oligarchies; they thought of their own advantage, of the public not at all. ... But it has now become a habit among the citizens of states, not even to care about equality; all men are seeking for dominion, or, if conquered, are willing to submit.

What then is the best form of government and what makes it the best is evident; and of other constitutions, since we say that there are many kinds of democracy and many of oligarchy, it is not difficult to see which has the first and which the second or any other place in the order of excellence, now that we have determined which is the best. For that which is nearest to the best must of neces-sity be better, and that which is furthest from it worse, if we are judging abso-lutely and not relatively to given conditions: I say, "relatively to given conditions," since a particular government may be preferable, but another form may be better for some people.

READING QUESTIONS

1. What happens to a state dominated by the rich?
2. What happens to a state dominated by the poor?
3. According to Aristotle, which kind of state is best? What makes it the best?