

On The Progression of Democratic Governments and the Universal Rejection of Autocracy

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Abstract: Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* captures autocracy proper. It reiterates an era when physical might superseded the intellectual. During this era, government was assumed by the individual. Paine on the other hand, rejected utterly Accordingly the individual as government. He argues that the collective is the essence of government, one that is brought about by the Constitution. In building his arguments, Paine expounded that though the Magna Carter set out certain principles, it was not intrinsically a Constitution. He saw it as granting rights to a few, as opposed to the collective. Though ancient Roman emperors were above all tyrannical, it is vital to bear in mind that tyranny resulted from the moral deficit of the despot as opposed to the ill structure of government. Specifically, they had in place a system of balance and checks., modern democracy derived from these same arrangements, one that has by large guaranteed the Rights Of Man. Progress was brought about by rejecting inherited authority. In rejecting all forms of inherited authority, Paine emphasized that inherited authority elevates the incompetent over those who truly possess the capacity to govern. The order, technological advancements, medicine, improved agriculture, greater understanding of our planet would not have transpired if man had not the right to act on his dispositions. Thus, autocracy is not only incompatible with the rights of man, it is inherently incompatible with the nature of mankind.

Keywords: Autocracy versus Democracy, Roman Empire, Thomas Paine, Balance and Checks, Absolutism, Democracy, Constitution, Magna Carta.

I. INTRODUCTION

Gibbon's *History Of The Decline And Fall Of The Roman Empire* paints a historical picture, particularly of an era when physical capacity superseded intellectual capacity. While Gibbon echoed absolute authority through the individual, Thomas Paine proclaimed that governments must be founded on the consensus of the collective. While Gibbon presented Roman citizens as a *means* to an end, Paine expounded that citizens are in themselves *ends*, viz, the purpose government. This paper examines the progression of governments, specifically of the distinctions between absolutism and democracy.

II. BALANCE AND CHECKS

Before delving into the juxtaposition of absolutism and democracy, it is essential to point out that although the Roman system of government fell short in guarantying the *rights of man*, it nonetheless served as frame work for successful democracies—just as ancient Greece was frame work to it. By progression of governments, it does not mean per se that democracy in isolation undergoes incremental changes. It is a fixed form of government, one that is brought about by principles as set down. Progression as discussed here are changes that result when autocratic governments are dissolved.

Aristotle spoke on the earliest attempts to initiate balance and checks “Some people claim that the best polity is a mixture of the three basic forms, and as consequence they praise Spartan constitution because it is a combination of oligarchy,

monarchy and democracy. They call the king the monarchic element, the Gerousia the oligarchic element and say that the Ephors represent the democratic element, since they are selected from among the people" (Spyridakis and Nystrom, 29). The Gerousia consisted of 28 males of over 60 years of age. They were vested with the power to try murder cases, impose death penalties and reject legislation (they also had the power to banish). The Ephors consisted of members from individual villages and were elected for one year. They heard civil matters and were conferred with the power of impeachment (king). They also followed the king into battle ^[1] (HSC/CSU).^[2] With this as starting point, it becomes evident that the Roman State borrowed from this same system of balance and checks. Milman, the editor of the *History Of The Decline And Fall Of The Roman Empire* pointed out that "...The Roman senate appeared to possess the sovereign authority, and devolved on the emperors all the executive powers of government" (Milman ed.; pt. 1, ch. 1). At this point in epoch, emperors in general acknowledged the powers of the Senate. More so, they were aware of the *telos* of distribution of powers. As he further points out, "...The emperors, for the most part, were satisfied with preserving those dominions which had been acquired by the policy of the senate, the active emulations of the consuls, and the martial enthusiasm of the people" (Milman; pt. 1, ch. 1). These well guided principles degenerated under the reign of Commodus. Unlike his father and predecessor who esteemed the principles of government, Commodus ruled solely by the sword; he endeavored to be unsurpassed in tyranny. This invokes Paine's argument that government without the consent of the governed is not government. "All hereditary government is in its nature tyranny. An heritable crown, or an heritable throne, or by what other fanciful name such things may be called, have no other significant explanation than that mankind are heritable property. To inherit a government, is to inherit the people, as if they were flocks and herds" (Paine, Rights of Man; pt.2, ch.3). After the degeneration of the original system in Rome, the population was more or less reduced to property; they had no say in respect to who governed. The sale of the throne to Didius Julianus further epitomized a system that was not of democracy.

III. SOCIAL CONTRACT IS NOT ORIGINAL RIGHT

Though a despot as citizen pretends to an underlying social contract, for Paine, a Social Contract precedes government; it is necessarily prior to it. It is this initial contract that made possible the framework upon which governments operate. Thomas Hobbes theorized, "*I authorise and give up my right of governing myself, to this man, or to this assembly of men, on this condition...*" (Cahn 233), one that he called a commonwealth. Expounding on the same idea, Merriam argued that "The transition from society to government is effected by a contract between members of the society. By the terms of this agreement, each individual retains all the rights which he is able to enforce, such as "rights of the mind," and the right to act for one's own happiness where this is not in conflict with the happiness of others. Rights which one possesses but is unable to enforce are deposited in the "common stock "" (392). This deposit, as made into the *common stock*, is Original Right. For Paine, this *Right* existed among men before government:

It has been thought a considerable advance towards establishing the principles of Freedom to say that Government is a compact between those who govern and those who are governed; but this cannot be true, because it is putting the effect before the cause; for as man must have existed before governments existed, there necessarily was a time when governments did not exist, and consequently there could originally exist no governors to form such a compact with. The fact therefore must be that the individuals themselves, each in his own personal and sovereign right, entered into a compact with each other to produce a government: and this is the only mode in which governments have a right to arise, and the only principle on which they have a right to exist (Paine, Rights of Man; Part The First Being An Answer To Mr. Burke's).

This is essentially not far removed from the concept that the consent of fathers is non-binding on children.

When authority to govern is hereditary, the principle that guides government is detached from its foundation. As observed during the rule of Marcus Aurelius' son Commodus. Gibbon underscored "Commodus had now attained the summit of vice and infamy. Amidst the acclamations of a flattering court, he was unable to disguise from himself, that he had deserved the contempt and hatred of every man of sense and virtue in his empire...History has preserved a long list of consular senators sacrificed to his wanton suspicion ..." (Gibbon; pt.2, ch. 4). This pattern of tyranny was also observed during the rule of Caracalla. Like Commodus, he too inherited the purple from his father.^[3] Gibbon highlighted his tyrannical ways "From a secure post in the temple of Serapis, he viewed and directed the slaughter of many thousand citizens, as well as strangers, without distinguishing the number or the crime of the sufferers; since as he coolly informed the senate, all the Alexandrians, those who perished, and those who had escaped, were alike guilty" (Gibbon; pt.2, ch.6).

In a true democracy, these defects are corrected since every individual casts a vote for who is deemed best suited to execute the duties of office. More so, there are term constraints. Accordingly, a government of general consensus is brought about by principles which are doubly its foundation. These principles embrace the collective while at the same time setting the boundaries of government. In an absolute government however, these principles are devoid. Specifically, the whim of the despot controls the machinery of government. Paine propounded the need to remove these effects, or rather defects at their root cause. If oppressive governments were left to their devices, changes will never obtain. In practical terms, *revolutions* rectify the repression of absolute governments. As emphasized “When a man reflects on the condition which France was in from the nature of her government, he will see other causes for revolt than those which immediately connect themselves with the person ... There were, if I may so express it, a thousand despotisms to be reformed in France, which had grown up under the hereditary despotism of the monarchy, and became so rooted as to be in a great measure independent of it. Between the Monarchy, the Parliament, and the Church there was a rivalry of despotism...” (Paine, Rights of Man; Part the First Being an Answer to Mr. Burke’s). In the light of today’s democracy, particularly in America, it is plain to see that the absence of these defects derives from the consent of the governed along with the founding-principles that inhibit these vices.

IV. AUTOCRACY AND COMMERCE AN INAUSPICIOUS MATCH

When the U.S. promotes democracy in repressive countries, autocrats often counter by claiming that democracy is a western conception and that it is alien to their culture and religion. In actual fact, democracy is of no culture, of no religion, it is transcendental. It removes government from the hands of a few, thus returning it to where it rightful belongs; the collective.

Democracy *proper*, and capitalism are relatively inseparable, the latter results from the former, and the latter strengthens the former. If all nations on earth were constituted in democracy, poverty in impoverished nations will decrease concomitantly. As placed in perspective by Paine “Agriculture, commerce, manufactures, and the tranquil arts, by which the prosperity of *Nations* is best promoted, require a different system of Government, and a different species of knowledge to direct its operations, than what might have been required in the former condition of the world” (Observations On The Declaration Of Rights). To be exact, autocracy stanches the economic growth of a nation, the effects of which the autocrat is shielded from, one of which he is inherently cause.

V. MAKING SENSE OF THE APPARATUS OF WAR IN A DEMOCRACY

In relation to Paine’s argument that democracy will make wars unnecessary, he was for the most part exact. Since World War II, America’s wars were waged on the basis of fostering freedom. In Vietnam for instance, it was to prevent the expansion of communism. Rotter explained “Primarily, every American president regarded the enemy in Vietnam--the Vietminh; its 1960s successor, the National Liberation Front (NLF); and the government of North Vietnam, led by Ho Chi Minh--as agents of global communism. U.S. policymakers, and most Americans, regarded communism as the antithesis of all they held dear. Communists scorned democracy, violated human rights, pursued military aggression, and created closed state economies that barely traded with capitalist countries” (n.pag.). The same may be said of both Iraq wars. Though the U.S. did not find Weapons of Mass Destruction in 2003, it nonetheless gave Iraq back to its rightful owners. A *Freedom House Special Report* highlighted that “The ouster of Saddam Hussein in April 2003 ended a reign of fear in which the Iraqi government maintained complete and brutal control... For nearly three decades, official government propaganda dominated media coverage in Iraq, with few openings for voices and sources of information independent of the government” (1). The most eminent of all is the establishment of democracy in Afghanistan. A country that was previously governed by despotic warlords elected its own leaders and representatives for the first time in its dark history.

Relative to these specifics, it must follow that these wars were undertaken to free the people of Afghanistan and Iraq from the chokehold of tyrannical regimes. Pointing out the positive effects of democracy, Burrows stated that “Before 9/11, when the Taliban ruled Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein ruled Iraq, both nations fell into the “worst of the worst” category in terms of freedom – earning the worst possible scores in the areas of political rights and civil liberties. After the defeat of the Taliban and the removal of Saddam Hussein, the “freedom scores” for both countries increased for a brief period of time” (n.pag.). In relation to the object of this paper, if America was a non-democratic country, it would have no need to promote global freedom. Conversely, America’s stance on universal freedom results from its egalitarian principles. Consequently, fostering the *rights of man* in these regions, allowed for the removal of despotic regimes which in turn unbound the populace from their chains.

VI. ON THE NECESSITY OF CONSTITUTIONS

A Constitution is the heart and soul of a democratic government. No democracy is complete without it. It prescribes the order of government. Quoting Hegel in the *Philosophy Of Right*, Cahn wrote that “Civil Society [is] an association of members as self-subsistent individuals in a universality ... Their association is brought about by their needs, by the legal system—the means to security of person and property –and by an external organization for attaining their particular and common interests. This external state is brought back to and welded into unity in the *Constitution Of The State* which is the end and actuality of both the substantial universal order and the public life devoted thereto” (Cahn 397). With this definition, it must likewise follow that authority in a democracy is vested solely in a constitution.

For Paine, a constitution is a document that is written. Furthermore, he perceived it as the only document that is binding on future generations, one that he explained in depth in his responses to Burke. While scholars often point to the Magna Carta as the first constitution, Paine argued that it was anything but. He made clear the dissimilarities “Magna Charta, as it was called (it is now like an almanack of the same date), was no more than compelling the government to renounce a part of its assumptions. It did not create and give powers to government in a manner a constitution does; but was, as far as it went, of the nature of a re-conquest, and not a constitution; for could the nation have totally expelled the usurpation, as France has done its despotism, it would then have had a constitution to form” (Paine, *Of Constitutions*, ch. 4). In accord, a real Constitution serves to circumvent the misuse of authority, as evident in Iraq and Afghanistan. Though there was a constitution in place under Saddam, it in reality had no influence on the ordering of government; government was executed by caprice. And this government made absent the rights of man as opposed to nurturing man in his rights.

While a democratic government is governed by a constitution, it does not necessarily mean that government is the constitution; it acts by it. It is integral to distinguish it from being one with it. Cabinets come and go, yet the governing document remains:

From the want of understanding the difference between a constitution and a government... They could not but perceive, that there must necessarily be a controlling power existing somewhere, and they placed this power in the discretion of the persons exercising the government, instead of placing it in a constitution formed by the nation. When it is in a constitution, it has the nation for its support, and the natural and the political controlling powers are together. The laws which are enacted by governments, control men only as individuals, but the nation, through its constitution, controls the whole government, and has a natural ability to do so. The final controlling power, therefore, and the original constituting power, are one and the same power (Paine, *Of Constitutions*, ch. 4).

In view of the changes in France and America, an age of reason did in fact take place. Explicitly, the rejection of autocracy for direct participation in government. It was further the age of reason because the fallacy of the hereditary right to govern was replaced by a constitution. In plain terms “Government, on the old system, is an assumption of power, for the aggrandisement of itself; on the new, a delegation of power for the common benefit of society” (Paine, *Rights Of Man*; pt.2 ch.3). It is in this progression of universal stance that the realization of the rights of man obtained.

VII. ON THE RELIGIOUS IN ANCIENT GOVERNMENTS

During the rule of Julian, the citizens of Rome suffered the amalgamation of State and Religion. Though Julian saw himself as piously re-instituting the religion of the Roman people’s ancestors, he nonetheless exposed Christians to extensive prosecutions. Christians were considered idolaters and prosecuted in all levels of society. Gibbon wrote in length on these persecutions “...The greater part of the Christian officers were gradually removed from their employments in the state, the army, and the provinces. The hopes of future candidates were extinguished by the declared partiality of a prince, who maliciously reminded them, that it was unlawful for a Christian to use the sword, either of justice, or of war; and who studiously guarded the camp and the tribunals with the ensigns of idolatry” (pt.4, ch.23). Paine described this sort of union as ‘Law-Religions’, and that it produces more evil than good. That “By engendering the church with the state, a sort of mule-animal, capable only of destroying, and not of breeding up, is produced, called the [Religion] established by Law. It is a stranger, even from its birth, to any parent mother, on whom it is begotten, and whom in time it kicks out and destroys” (Paine, *Rights of Man*; Part the First Being an Answer to Mr. Burke’s). Above all, and particularly in the light of the perils caused by this illicit amalgamation of Religion and State, it is evident the reason why the first amendment of the U.S. constitution prohibits this union.

Writing on the boundaries of community polity, Bentley saw “Paine [as giving] wide berth to human freedom so that individuals could respond to life's contingencies and relieve themselves of the burdens of both past and future” (Bentley 346). Vis-à-vis the “burden of the past”, i.e., unrepresentative governments, they are in reality a “thing of the past.” The age of reason is the immediate present as perpetually preserved in the governing document; the *Constitution*.

In brief, while the principles of democracy have remained intrinsically the same through time, there have nevertheless been changes to re-validate it as the government of the people. Gone are those days when countless papers in ballot boxes could be easily manipulated in one direction or the other. In today's democracy, technology has not only improved the voting process, it has equally infused the democratic process with transparency and accountability.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Paine brought man to the realization of its rights, needless to mention he exposed the hereditary right to govern for what it really was. He instilled in the populace those rights that were nullified by the usurpation of conquerors. The ancient structure of government in both Rome and Greece represents an attempt to prevent the tyranny that results from the concentration of the executive, judicial, and legislative powers in one individual. It is the carving out of these bodies that made possible today's progress, one that was further perfected by countries as adopted, particularly the United States.

The *Progression Of Democratic Government* is the progress of mankind. As for the *Rejection Of Autocracy*, the same holds absolute. Had man not realized its Rights, one may ultimately hold that the advancement in all areas of society as observed today would not have obtained because the individual freedom which collectively fosters the advancement of the whole was previously subdued. In all, government was brought about for the people, and when people are excluded from it, it is not government.

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