

Saint Thomas and the Three Orders of the Medieval Imaginary.  
An exploration of inequality among men in his social and political philosophy

Santo Tomás y los tres órdenes del imaginario medieval.  
Una exploración en su filosofía social y política de la desigualdad entre los hombres

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## Abstract

This paper examines inequality among men from a social and political perspective, in which the concept of ‘trifunctionality’ emerges as a key concept. The reflection presented here constitutes a continuation of a fundamental first part (published in issue 27 (2025), pp. 38-64, of this same journal), which dealt with the anthropological-metaphysical and theological doctrine of inequality among men according to Saint Thomas. This reflection now focuses on the Thomistic formulation of trifunctionality from both a social and political perspective. Returning to the conclusion of the first part, it is reaffirmed here that inequalities among men are not primarily natural, but rather moral. Now, in addressing this issue, while the existence of social and political inequalities is revealed, in Thomas’ view, these are fundamentally structural, not the result of individual moral merit. Furthermore, the free nature of the formation of society, based on consensus, highlights the possibility of an ever-increasing closeness among people, a consequence of that awareness of fundamental equality among

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them brought about by social friendship. Such progress, inherent to the dynamism of optimal social development, of a civilizing kind, can never occur outside the framework of hierarchical structures and functions that necessarily imply inequality among men.

**Keywords:** Thomas Aquinas, Social Inequality, Political and Social Trifunctionality, Political Participation.

## Resumen

Este trabajo constituye un examen de la desigualdad entre los hombres desde un punto de vista social y político, donde el concepto de ‘trifuncionalidad’ se revela como un concepto clave. La reflexión aquí presentada constituye la continuación de una primera y fundamental parte (publicada en el n. 27 (2025), pp. 38-64, de esta misma revista), que versó sobre la doctrina antropológico-metafísica y teológica de la desigualdad entre los hombres según Santo Tomás. Ahora la reflexión se centra en la formulación tomística de la trifuncionalidad tanto desde el punto de vista social cuanto político. Retomando la conclusión de la primera parte, se reafirma aquí que las desigualdades entre los hombres no son principalmente de tipo natural, cuanto de tipo moral. Ahora, en el abordaje de esta cuestión, si bien se revela la existencia de desigualdades sociales y políticas, a juicio de Tomás, tales son fundamentalmente de carácter estructural, no fruto de un mérito moral individual. A su vez, la índole libre de la confección de la sociedad, efectuada desde el *consensus*, pone de relieve la posibilidad de una siempre creciente cercanía entre los hombres, fruto de esa conciencia de igualdad fundamental entre ellos causada por la amistad social. Tal progreso, inherente al dinamismo de un óptimo desenvolvimiento social, de tipo civilizatorio, no puede darse nunca fuera del marco de estructuras jerárquicas y funciones de necesaria desigualdad entre los hombres.

**Palabras clave:** Tomás de Aquino, Desigualdad Social, Trifuncionalidad Política y Social, Participación política.

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## Introducción

When in 1978 Georges Duby published *Les trois ordres ou l'imaginaire du féodalisme*—the medievalist canon around the specific inequalities of social hierarchy—the brief reflection of Thomas Aquinas on the necessary tripartite character of society, exposed in *S. th.*, I, q. 108, a. 2, was not even cited in *confer*. In any case, time has shown that that brief passage contains a decisive key to advancing in the interpretation of this author's social thought. What is the relevance of that omission? The fact that, while it is rare to see studies on the social and political thought of Thomas Aquinas contextualized within medieval studies practiced by the *Annales* school and its followers, at the same time, those kinds of omissions also do not help bring the parts closer together. In this sense, a divorce is seen between interpretations of Aquinas' philosophy and theology and medieval studies typically configured by the history of mentalities.

Now, if the seductive narrative of Duby consists of a discourse between historiography and the interpretation of the various ideologies appearing on stage, while the scientific determination of the philosophical-theological ideas supporting those ideologies being secondary in that narrative, it certainly makes sense to perform the inverse hermeneutic operation: to place first importance on the interpretation of an author's philosophical-theological ideas, placing in a second plane, as if it were a more or less picturesque landscape that stimulates contemplation, the cultural battle that interests Duby above all else. From the perspective of an investigation into the truth about man and society, this inversion seems not only possible but necessary. In any case, if it is useful—and even essential—to observe philosophical and theological discussions within the framework of their cultural battle, this is nothing other than restoring the study of an intellectual expression to its historiographical

context for the sake of its intelligibility.<sup>2</sup> But if one confuses the means with the end, things would be forced to the point of converting philosophy into ideology, that is, into a system of ideas put at the service of a specific political practice.

And it is not judged that Duby errs in supposing the existence of diverse ideologies in the Middle Ages; he calls them ‘imaginaries.’ However, based on his magnificent study, the mistake would be to suppose that every intellectual discourse of that era—or of any other—is simply ideological. The political independence of the philosophical-theological thought of Thomas Aquinas is not something fictitious. Moreover, precisely due to the reality of that independence, his work becomes capable of serving political enterprises of very diverse kinds, even of opposite signs or factions.

The nature of the Thomistic discourse on social trifunctionality and related issues is certainly a discourse developed not in the symbolic mode of medieval ideologists, but rather in the scientific mode of the intellectual apogee of the 13th century; belonging, in turn, not only to the realm of socio-political philosophy but also to natural and metaphysical philosophy, and even theology and canon law. Could this be the reason that explains Duby’s omission, namely, the fact that Aquinas goes back both to a metaphysical consideration of social trifunctionality, according to the new mode of Aristotelian argumentation, as well as to a strictly ethical-political reflection on human society, leaving behind the “fantastic symbolism” (Chenu, 1969, p. 15) of the authors who followed Pseudo-Dionysius? If the Dionysian paradigm was to assimilate the ecclesiastical hierarchy to the angelic and the political to the ecclesiastical, instead, from the hand of Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas becomes capable of decoupling the assimilation of the hierarchies of one sphere from the other, to analyze each reality on its own terms, according to its own essence, aside from the relations of causality, participation, and similarity of one realm of being with another. This is what the

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<sup>2</sup> A study of this style—albeit limited—is that of Catto (1976).

rational analysis of the new times demanded, and Aquinas was faithful to that demand.<sup>3</sup> Thus, following Aristotle, Aquinas would postulate that above the hierarchy of functions, what is most necessary in a human community, in order to achieve its fullness and happiness, is the cooperation among its members:

According to the Philosopher in the *Ethics* (*Nicomachean Ethics* 10.4, 1174b13–1175a22), delight (*delectatio*) follows on a perfected activity (*operationem perfectam*). Thus, for joyfulness (*jucunditatem*) a sharing (*consortium*) is required in that nature in which there cannot be a complete activity in one without the help of another (*alterius adjutorio*), as in men, among whom one by himself is not sufficient for the activity of his species.<sup>4</sup>

The present work is divided into two parts. The first addresses the meaning of the Thomistic formulation regarding social and political trifunctionality. The second reveals the importance of examining social and political inequalities in light of human inequalities, both natural and moral; and, as a consequence of this examination, the need arises to consider the free character of the composition of society, based on consensus. This voluntary participation of the members of the community highlights the existence of the dynamic character inherent to inequality among men in the development of said community. And given this dynamism, it can be observed how Aquinas evaluates that, when man properly builds his sociability, a

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<sup>3</sup> On the renewed and certainly *unfaithful* reading of Thomas in relation to the ‘traditional’ interpretation of Pseudo-Dionysius (in the indicated sense of abandoning the practice of equating the hierarchy of human society to the ecclesiastical, and of this latter to the angelic), the works of Luscombe (2003) and (1988) and Perpere (2014) are especially clarifying; see also Hankey (1997). In this regard, it is highly significant—as Luscombe (1988, pp. 262-263) points out—that Aquinas’ socio-political philosophy records not only a paradigm shift regarding the Areopagitic assimilation of human politics to the ecclesiastical and angelic organization, but also a change related to “the Augustinian concept that the state is the consequence of original sin and that rulership is the expression of a lust for domination over men.” For a recent reflection on the relationship between dominium and freedom in Aquinas, see Argüello (2024); and on the same topic in the early Franciscan and Dominican theology (especially Bonaventure and Albertus Magnus), see Schwartz (2023), who takes as starting point the question of angelic prelacy as a form of subjection that in no way implies a loss of freedom in the subject angels.

<sup>4</sup> *Super Sent.*, II, d. 3, q. 1, a. 4, ad 4.

certain progress in human equality is achieved, operationally reducing the distance between the hierarchically related terms.

## 1. Economic-social and political trifunctionality

Two distinct kinds of trifunctionality are recorded in the work of Thomas Aquinas, that is, two different approaches to understanding the functioning of human collective organisms: a social type of trifunctionality and a political type. In both cases, the issue of inequality among men comes into play.

On the one hand, Aquinas formulates a kind of social polyfunctionality, which does not seem to denote or imply a political-constitutional character by itself. This occurs in *S. th.*, I, q. 108, a. 2, where it is said that a city (*civitas*) requires several orders, defined by their respective offices and actions (*diversitas ordinum secundum diversa officia et actus*); and then it successively enumerates “the order of those who judge, and another of those who fight, and another of those who labor in the fields (*alius est ordo iudicantium, aliis pugnantium, aliis laborantium in agris*),” adding—with the clause *et sic de aliis* (and so forth)—that there may be other orders, although mentioning only those is sufficient. And why would it be sufficient to mention those three orders of social role? Because, “although one city thus comprises several orders, all may be reduced to three, when we consider that every [faultless] multitude (*quaelibet multitudo perfecta*) has a beginning, a middle, and an end (*principium, medium et finem*).” This reason adduced is certainly metaphysical in nature: sociopolitical perfection, if it is to be truly perfection, cannot fail to be based on the very reason of perfection, which is metaphysical in nature. Indeed, this explains the political derivation that Aquinas will make immediately afterward:

So (*unde et*) in every city, a threefold order of men (*triplex ordo hominum*) is to be seen, some of whom are supreme (*supremi*), as the nobles (*optimates*); others are the

last (*infimi*), as the common people (*vilis populus*), while others hold a place between these (*medii*), as the middle-class (*populus honorabilis*).<sup>5</sup>

Although Aquinas has not said exactly that the aristocrats of the upper class were the judges, the middle class of distinguished families were the fighters, and the poor of the lower part of the people were the laborers, it is logical to make the deduction. Of course, this hierarchy or gradation does not by itself represent any moral evaluation but only a metaphysical-social and political description: the supreme in this case is not morally *better* than the lowest level; nor is this, consequently, *worse* than that. That is, the moral quality—high or low—of those occupying the upper positions is not guaranteed by the elevation of the office (*ordo, officium*) objectively considered. The same applies to middle or lower positions: the low or high degree of moral quality of a laborer or a warrior is not at all tied to the objective gradation of his position.

Alongside the postulation of this economic-social trifunctionality, Aquinas also accounts, on the other hand, for trifunctionality in the political sphere. According to *S. th.*, I-II, q. 105, a. 1, “in respect of the kinds of government (*speciem regiminis*), or the different ways in which the constitutions are established (*ordinationis principatum*) [...], the best form of government (*optima ordinatio*) is in a state or kingdom, where one is given the power to preside over all [according to virtue (*secundum virtutem*)], aided by some “others,” who are under him, “having governing powers” also according to virtue (*et sub ipso sunt aliqui principantes secundum virtutem*: ‘virtue’ here does not mean primarily ability in moral terms but in technical ones):

and yet, Aquinas adds, a government of this kind is shared by all (*talis principatus ad omnes pertinet*), both because all are eligible to govern (*ex omnibus eligi possunt*), and because the rules are chosen by all (*ab omnibus eliguntur*). For this is the best form of polity (*optima politia*), being partly kingdom, since there is one at the head of all; partly

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<sup>5</sup> *S. th.*, I, q. 108, a. 2.

aristocracy, insofar as a number of persons are set in authority; partly democracy, i.e., government by the people, insofar as the rulers can be chosen from the people, and the people have the right to choose their rulers (*bene commixta ex regno, inquantum unus praeest; et aristocracia, inquantum multi principantur secundum virtutem; et ex democratia, idest potestate populi, inquantum ex popularibus possunt eligi principes, et ad populum pertinet electio principum*).<sup>6</sup>

In sum, monarchy, aristocracy and democracy. Before Lincoln stated it, here democracy is already conceived as government of the people, by the people, and for the people.<sup>7</sup> So, for Thomas, in any optimally constituted society, a triple diversity of functions is essential, also regarding the political aspect, not only the social. However, although these parts are indicated there in their properly political features, namely in the royal, aristocratic, and popular roles (note that there is no mention there of ‘representatives of the people’), nevertheless, these parts cannot fail to harbor in fact aspects of social constitution, thus giving rise to a natural respective identification with the group of the noblemen, that of the people of distinguished and powerful lineage (*populus honorabilis*), and that of the laborers, mentioned in *S. th.*, I, q. 108, a. 2.

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<sup>6</sup> *S. th.*, I-II, q. 105, a. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Previously, in *S. th.*, I-II, q. 95 a. 4, based on the thought of Isidore of Seville, Thomas showed that the form of government—both legal and political—made up of all the following three, is the best (*est etiam aliquod regimen ex ipsis commixtum, quod est optimum, et secundum hoc sumitur lex*): “monarchy, i.e., when the state is governed by one” and produces “*Royal Ordinances*”, “*aristocracy*” together with “*oligarchy*”, that is, the elite of the *optimates* -“the best men or men of highest rank”- and of “a few rich and powerful men”, which produces, in the first case, “the *Authoritative legal opinions* and *Decrees of the Senate*” and, in the second case, “*Praetorian*, also called *Honorary*, law”; and finally, that form of government “of the people, which is called *democracy*, and there we have *Decrees of the commonalty (pebliscita)*.” A plebiscitary rule is a system in which proposals approved by a majority of votes -that is what plebiscites consist of- become sovereign. In short, St. Thomas concludes, the optimal quality of this mixed system is due to the fact that, as Isidoro stated, in that case the law is sanctioned by society as a whole, namely, by the *Lords and Commons*, i.e., the patrician senators together with the plebeians or deputies of the common people (*lex, «quam maiores natu simul cum pleibus sanxerunt», ut Isidorus dicit*). Voegelin (1998) has shown how these socio-political terms or categories can be seen embodied in the historical dynamism of the Patarine movement in Milan in the second half of the 11th century and in that of the Ciompi in Florence in the 14th century.

Therefore, it is pertinent to ask whether for Thomas there exists some interweaving between social and political trifunctionality, or even more generally, between the social and political spheres. On this point, on the one hand, we find the postulation of a certain conditioning that the social order imposes on the political regime:

a different kind of order (*diversam rationem ordinis*) must be observed in the government of a state (*in regimine civitatis*) according to the different status of the subjects, and according to the different ends to which they are directed (*diversas conditiones eorum qui subiiciuntur regimini et secundum diversa ad quae ordinantur*), for there must be a different rule for soldiers (*milites*) to make them ready to fight, and for craftsmen (*artifices*) to make them able to work.<sup>8</sup>

As if to say: to understand the form of political organization (*regimen*), it is necessary to pay attention to the various occupations or professions (*ordines*) that take place there; which, in turn, is conditioned by the way (*conditiones*) the subjects who occupy the aforementioned *ordines* live. In sum, political organization depends, in its material or social base, on how the subjects who integrate it ultimately live, considering beforehand their belonging to their respective *ordines* or professional corporations.<sup>9</sup> Thomas comes to conceive the diverse relationships within a *polis* or *respublica* as relationships that in a certain way come to outline a certain *social type*, that is, a particular community (*communicatio*), such as the community of farmers or that of merchants; and, in this sense, that such social relationships form certain intermediate societies between the individual and the highest political community (*civitas* or *regnum*).

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<sup>8</sup> C.G., III, c. 111.

<sup>9</sup> On the necessity of heterogeneity and pluralism of social functions to constitute a *civitas*, that is, a true political community, see the Socratic arguments—not in any way censured by Thomas—exposed in *Super Pol.*, II, 1, lines 202-240 and 321-336; heterogeneity that contrasts with the totalitarian homogeneity of Arcadian society, a kind of massifying proto-individualism, similar to that described by Tocqueville in relation to American society.

In *Contra impugnantes*, Thomas points out the need to distinguish a public society from a private one:

a society is called public (*publica societas*) when people interact with one another to form a republic (*in una respublica constituenda*), just as all the people of a city or kingdom associate in a single republic (*omnes homines unius civitatis vel unius regni in una respublica sociantur*). A private society (*privata societas*), on the other hand, is one that comes together to carry out a private business (*aliquid negotium privatum*), such as when two or three people form a partnership to undertake the same business together.<sup>10</sup>

When Thomas distinguishes here the public and private character of a society, he does not mean that every intermediate society is necessarily private; it can also be public, because its business is of a public nature, even if temporary:

Sometimes, the business for which a group of people (*multitudo*) meet is chosen to be carried out temporarily; then it is not a lasting society, but a temporary one (*non est societas perpetua, sed temporalis*); just as many merchants agree to establish a weekly fair (*ad nundinas*), not to remain there permanently (*non ut ibidem perpetuo morentur*), but only while their business is carried out there; in this case, it is a *public but temporary society* (*et haec est societas publica sed temporalis*).<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately, the public character of a society is not given by its size or its durability, but by the nature and purpose of the business to be carried out, namely, whether it is conducted for the exclusive benefit of its members, or whether it transcends them and is open to the public. And in this sense, the durability of such a business can vary without altering its publicity.

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<sup>10</sup> *Contra impugnantes*, c. 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Contra impugnantes*, c. 3, my emphasis.

On the other hand, inverse to the conditioning that the social imposes on the political, at the same time, an architectural or structural causality of political ordering with respect to the social sphere is postulated:

a higher cause is not subjected to a cause of a lower order; but conversely. An example of this may be seen in human affairs. On the father of a family (*ex patrefamilias*) depends the order of the household (*ordo domus*); which order is contained in the order of the city (*sub ordine civitatis*); which order again depends on the ruler of the city (*a civitatis rectore*); while this last order depends on that of the king (*sub ordine regis*), by whom the whole kingdom is ordered (*totum regnum ordinatur*).<sup>12</sup>

King who organizes the kingdom, ruler of the city, father of the family who organizes the house. Such is the architecture required for there to be order, harmony, and even cohesion among the diverse parts of the human community; and ultimately, among the diverse human behaviors. According to this architecture, there must be not only *organicity*, because at the ethical-political level “the good disposition of parts depends on their relation to the whole (*bona enim dispositio partis accipitur secundum habitudinem ad totum*),”<sup>13</sup> but also *hierarchy*, because the inferior causes depend, in terms of the effectiveness of their action, not only on themselves but also on the superior causes. Moreover, this is what the Social Doctrine of the Church has developed under the ‘principle of subsidiarity.’ In sum, an Aristotelian political architecture encompasses both organic solidarity and hierarchy of functions.<sup>14</sup>

Something peculiar, then, is that, according to Thomas Aquinas, the diversity of ‘functions’ (*officia*) that makes up the organicity of a community also constitutes in some

<sup>12</sup> *S. th.*, I, q. 105, a. 6.

<sup>13</sup> *S. th.*, II-II, q. 47, a. 10, ad 2.

<sup>14</sup> Although referred already to modern society and in discussion with Marxism, the suggestion of Casadesús (2013, p. 62) about the essentially integrative character of social stratification is interesting.

way a diversity of orders or degrees (*ordines vel gradus*).<sup>15</sup> In this sense, social order is not conceived in a metaphysically egalitarian way: it is clear that, ontologically considered, the office of judging is richer than that of fighting, and this one richer than that of working the land, because the end of the first not only encompasses the good of a greater number of men than the others (quantitative reason), but it is of a more perfect kind or species (qualitative reason) (*cfr. S. th., II-II, q. 58, a. 7, ad 2*). The needs and desires that the superior office helps to satisfy are humanly higher and more perfect than those of the inferior office, besides the fact that the superior office holds more power, having more possibilities of influence over the inferior offices. At the same time, it is clear that legal affairs could not be exercised if there were nothing to eat, or if there were no defense of the space where one could eat and judge; and precisely for this reason, the law is concerned with guaranteeing the normal existence of those conditions. However, it is by no means assumed that the superior functions are ethically more in accord with human nature than the inferior ones—in the sense that the acts exercised by the superior function inherently have greater moral goodness than those of the inferior functions. Moral goodness or badness is something proper to the acts of a particular subject, not of a social structure.<sup>16</sup> Moral virtue is certainly distinct from technical virtue: social hierarchy indicates a gradation of quality only concerning the latter virtue, not the former. And in this sense, if a metaphysical inequality is noticed in the organicity of human communities, such an appreciation must be complemented with the warning of an equality *de iure* in the ethical sense: any professional in a society has, in principle, the same

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<sup>15</sup> In such a sense, it has been said that the Thomistic conception of society “consists in a system of relationships of *subordination* and *coordination*” (Healy, 1972, p. 14, my emphasis). The nature of this communal organicity in Aquinas’ thought is currently subject of intense discussion. See, for example, Harris (2021) and Argüello & Destefanis (2024, pp. 662-670).

<sup>16</sup> Speaking of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, Thomas Aquinas holds that, in no case within the Church, is it considered that there is a class of faithful who are better, that is, inherently holier, than another, although certainly there is hierarchy, that is, higher functions than others. This allows him to conclude that, in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, persons of lower rank can enlighten, that is, instruct and lead those of higher rank (something certainly impossible in the hierarchy of angels): “in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, sometimes those who are the nearer to God in sanctity, are in the lowest grade (*gradu infimi*), and are not conspicuous for science (*scientia non eminentes*); and some also are eminent in one kind of science, and fail in another (*et quidam in uno etiam secundum scientiam eminent, et in alio deficiunt*); and on that account superiors may be taught by inferiors (*superiores ab inferioribus doceri possunt*)” (*S. th., I, q. 106, a. 3, ad 1*). After all, these words had been recorded from the mouth of Jesus: “the last shall be first” (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Matthew 20:16).

possibility of reaching the highest levels of human—ethical—perfection as anyone belonging to another field of action. Being a laborer will not prevent this, nor will being a judge give a special hand.

## 2. Socio-political inequalities and their relation to natural and moral inequalities

One of the most important derivations from the examination of Thomas Aquinas's fundamental philosophy on the issue of inequality among men is that it is not imperative or necessary that those who are naturally the best, that is, those *de iure* most capable of doing so, rule (see Argüello, 2025). Despite the determinist conception upheld by some interpreters,<sup>17</sup> Thomas Aquinas explicitly recognizes that an atheist may govern and that the faithful Christian will equally have the duty to obey him in those human laws that do not contradict divine law. Now, if human social hierarchy had no choice but to be a faithful and exact reflection of natural hierarchies (interpretation held by Beer), then disobedience would be justified whenever it is considered that the currently vested authority is not really the superior subject indicated to rule, but someone inferior. Once again, just as with a ruler who is not Christian, Aquinas also observes that, regarding someone who, due to a deficiency in his person, was unworthy of a government office (*propter defectum personae, quia indignus est*),

does not impede his acquiring the right of prelature (*jus praelationis*). Since prelature (*praelatio*) in its form is always from God (which causes the debt of obedience), the subjects are bound to obey these kinds of prelates (*talibus praelatis*), though unworthy (*indignis*).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Paradigm of this interpretation is that of Beer (1986), who revisits the almost century-old interpretation of McIlwain (1932).

<sup>18</sup> *Super Sent.*, II, d. 44, q. 2, a. 2. Thus, it is clear that “Aquinas rejects Beer’s claim that all and only those who are superior in goodness hold political authority” (Murphy, 1997, p. 327; *cfr.* p. 329). And for this reason, in a very liberal sense, Aquinas considers that the proper political obedience of the subject is carried out because of

Of course, interpreters like Beer should not be challenged on the fact that Thomas unequivocally stated the necessity of hierarchy in an ideal or perfect society in an ideal or perfect society, that is, that there exists a hierarchy *de iure*. On the contrary, what is in dispute is the pronounced diminution (or direct suppression) of freedom—assumed in that interpretation—in the factual organization of human societies. In this sense, the existence of superiority of virtue and wisdom in certain individuals of the community “is not sufficient, though—as Murphy (1997, p. 327) states—to show that for Aquinas some humans have *natural authority* over other humans” (my emphasis). The historical way hierarchy is carried out in human societies is not something human beings have received innately, like a constellation of stars, the organization of some animal community, or even the angelic hierarchy, but something acquired voluntarily. If, according to Aquinas, natural law indeed commands that men institute political authority in order to effectively obtain a properly common good for them, the question of who should *de facto* hold that authority is object of human law, whether customary or positive.<sup>19</sup>

It is clear how, in Beer’s interpretation of the question of human authority in Aquinas—typically conservative, that is, one that advocates the supposed natural character of social immobility among the members of a political community<sup>20</sup>—the *de facto* issue is confused with the *de iure* one. This means that, while there are insights in the consideration of the essential or ideal notes of authority, the flaw lies in supposing that, in Thomas Aquinas, that description was a reality imposed naturally; that is, something that should be assented to or recognized without prior community deliberation.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Beer interprets that, if this

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the impersonal and institutional character of the authority, that is, according to the office or *bureaucratic* role of government, and not because of the personal qualities of the ruler (see Porter, 2025, p. 195).

<sup>19</sup> Cfr. Murphy (1997, p. 323).

<sup>20</sup> That which, in Beer’s words, is called “the hierarchic tradition”, whose conspicuous representative would be, in his judgment, Thomas Aquinas: “We may use the Thomistic system as a magnifying glass to bring more fully into view the deeper lineaments of the hierarchic idea” (Beer, 1986, p. 393).

<sup>21</sup> Here is a sufficient sample of statements that illustrate the fundamentals of this interpretation: “Thinkers in the hierarchic tradition such as Thomas were much concerned to show why the many should and do consent to be ruled by the wise and the holy. Such consent is not self-government, but its opposite. It is not the active consent of republican participation, but the passive consent of deference to the few” (Beer, 1986, p. 393). “For

were not done, then we would have subjects of ill will. Therefore, regarding the political role of subjects, everything boils down to their recognition of natural authority and its commands, or the absence of such assent. In other words, it is supposed that freedom is limited to mere acceptance or rejection of the natural authority of the just and wise, as if sovereignty or political power were not primarily something proper to the community. According to this Dionysian conception applied seamlessly to Saint Thomas, rulers would receive their power directly from powers above them, i.e., angels and ultimately God, without any deliberation in that process. In this sense, Saint Thomas would not foresee any kind of consensus or voluntary pact—*more aristotelico*—in relation to the establishment of the human authority that should govern, or even of the laws promulgated by that authority. This, as we will see next, openly contradicts Aquinas's teaching.<sup>22</sup>

What is at stake regarding the acceptance or rejection of Beer's interpretation and the supposed naturalistic hierarchical model upheld by Thomas Aquinas is the interpretation of the Thomistic theory concerning the *popular participation* in the rule (*ut omnes aliqua partem habeant in principatur*), i.e., that all should take some share in the government, as expressed in *S. th.*, I-II, q. 105, a. 1) and, especially, *popular consent* (*consensus totius multitudinis ad aliquid observandum*), i.e., “the consent of the whole people in favor of a particular observance,” as read in *S. th.*, I-II, q. 97, a. 3, ad 3), because in this last case the voluntary nature inherent in the *implementation* of political and social hierarchies in perfect human communities is at stake.

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the Thomistic synthesis of classical and Christian thought, the hierarchy that prevailed in human affairs was included in and justified by a greater hierarchy that prevailed in the cosmos [...]. In contrast with republican principles, its principles were authoritarian and deferential” (Beer, 1986, p. 394). “The order of the cosmos was static, composed of a countless number of fixed species, unchanging except in some cases for regular cycles of birth, growth, decay, and death” (Beer, 1986, p. 395). “In this political analogy, the relationship of ruler and ruled is one of authority and deference,” such that “the grounds of the ruler’s authority is his intellectual power (*virtus intellectiva*)” (Beer, 1986, p. 400), as if the ruler would need no additional will to achieve cohesion and some persuasion to gain the approval of the people. In this case, conservatism specifically leads to intellectualism.

<sup>22</sup> A brief refutation of this interpretation of Beer, in line with Murphy's, is found in Weithman (1998, p. 289).

In the naturalistic interpretation of social hierarchy, the limitation of the scope of popular consent lies concretely in two points: first, according to Beer, authority would not be generated according to Saint Thomas by popular consent, but this consent would be limited to being a mere deferential recognition of an already existing natural authority of the ruler—authority inherent in certain persons by virtue of their own intrinsic qualities. In other words, that popular consent consists precisely in this docile admission of the existence of a natural reality, namely, that of authority.<sup>23</sup> Second, the subjects would only be allowed to consent to “the legitimacy of the source of those dictate,”<sup>24</sup> without reaching that consent to the precepts themselves, namely, concerning their substance or content.<sup>25</sup> In short—always according to Beer’s interpretation of Thomas—, beyond the fact that the popular consent carried out by the subjects serves for the efficacy of the government, this consent would not properly grant a right to govern. Indeed, this right would be something natural and held only by some individuals naturally superior, in a similar way to the cosmic government that also counts with superior elements ruling the rest—except that in this last case they do not need to be recognized by the inferior elements. Thus, in the human case, while good subjects have no problem to recognize that ruling superiority as such, bad ones do, leaving them no alternative but to submit themselves for fear of punishment from the authority.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Cfr. Beer (1986, p. 417).

<sup>24</sup> Beer (1986, p. 415).

<sup>25</sup> Beer (1986, p. 415) argues as follows: “Recognizing that their ruler, natural or supernatural, has access to a realm of truth and goodness that is quite beyond them, the ruled defer to his determination of fact and value, secular or sacred. How this comes about is best seen in Thomas’s account of ecclesiastical government. According to that account, the faithful are brought to accept the authority of the priest not by the substance of the divine message he brings, but by his proof of his authority to deliver it. There are two ways in which the priest may win such deferential consent: by personal charisma and by charisma of office.” Apart from the fact that this interpretation regarding the legitimacy of ecclesiastical government would deserve separate comment, especially regarding the question of the *sensus fidei* on the part of the faithful people, it is also—as has been seen—debatable the homology in Aquinas between the ecclesiastical domain and the secular political domain imagined by Beer. Regarding the appreciation of *sensus fidei* in Aquinas’ work, it has recently been stated that “he knew that the faith of the universal Church is authoritatively expressed by her prelates, but he was also particularly interested in each believer’s personal instinct of faith” (International Theological Commission, 2014, n. 28); so, even in the ecclesiastical realm, it is seen that Thomas considered it necessary to attend to a certain *consensus* on the part of the ruled, since it is *tota Ecclesia*, that is, the *congregatio fidelium*, that professes *una fides* (cfr. S. th., II-II, q. 1, a. 10, *Super Sent.*, IV, d. 20, q. 1, a. 4, qc. 1).

<sup>26</sup> See Beer (1986, p. 414). Besides the criticisms by Murphy and Weithman of Beer’s interpretation, the one made by Tierney is also relevant. Speaking of the position of the medieval canonists in general, among which that of Thomas Aquinas is certainly included, this author states: “Canonists did not teach that ruling power in

There are two core points in which Beer's deficient interpretation reveals itself concerning voluntary popular consent: first, that, according to Thomas Aquinas, subjects should never lose that consciousness raising and that energy of will necessary to disobey human laws that might contradict divine laws<sup>27</sup>; second and most importantly, the fact that the scholastic asserts that, in any optimally organized political community, everyone must take part in some way in the rule.

This second question concerning the participation of all in power inherently involves the matter of political consensus, from which arises the problem of possession of power: to whom belongs the authority to make laws capable of guiding the entire community towards the common good? Thomas holds in this regard that this power belongs primarily to the people and, by derivation, to the rulers who represent them:

to order anything to the common good, belongs either to the whole people (*totius multitudinis*), or to someone who is the viceregent of the whole people (*alicuius gerentis vicem totius multitudinis*). And therefore the making of a law belongs either to the whole people or to a public personage who has care of the whole people (*pertinet ad personam publicam quae totius multitudinis curam habet*): since in all other matters the directing of anything to the end concerns him to whom the end belongs.<sup>28</sup>

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the church was derived from personal holiness—a saint did not have jurisdiction over his bishop. Nor was it derived from sacramental orders—a person without Holy Orders or in lower orders might exercise jurisdiction over a priest. Nor was it derived from individual wisdom—any church Father could be wiser than a pope. When the canonists asked *where jurisdiction did come from*, they normally emphasized *election*" (Tierney, 1987, p. 648, my emphasis).

<sup>27</sup> *Cfr.* Murphy (1997, p. 326).

<sup>28</sup> *S. th.*, I-II, q. 90, a. 3. And so that it is not thought that what is quoted is a mere exceptional formulation, in *S. th.*, I-II, q. 97, a. 3, ad 3, it is read, even more emphatically: "Si enim sit libera multitudo, quae possit sibi legem facere, plus est consensus totius multitudinis ad aliquid observandum, quem consuetudo manifestat, quam *auctoritas principis*, qui *non habet potestatem condendi legem, nisi in quantum gerit personam multitudinis*" (my emphasis); see also *S.th.*, II-II, q. 57, a. 2. Porter (2025, p. 188) has recently commented on this that "Aquinas does not explain how the community delegates power, but at least he does make the point that rule itself is not an individual entitlement, but a delegated exercise of the authority of the community taken

Beer interprets things exactly the opposite of what this text teaches. And because of this, from his interpretation, it becomes impossible to maintain that the people are the depository or first keeper of the law, that is, those who fundamentally hold that power, given that in his interpretation the action of the people in relation to the promulgation of the law is restricted to a mere recognition of it.

Regarding the question of popular participation, the key text is the one where political trifunctionality was enunciated, cited above. Returning to the teaching of that text, it is important not to overlook the praise expressed there for the *democraticum* (*S. th.*, I-II, q. 105, a. 1), that is, the *potestas populi* (*S. th.*, I-II, q. 104, a. 3, ad 2). What does “government by the people” consist of from this point of view? ‘People’ is that social agent who naturally gives life to the ruling intelligence from the most elementary and simple social base, and, at the same time, who is disposed to be organized by that intelligence. In this sense, the natural democratic order perceived by Thomas Aquinas regarding the best form of political organization rests on the fact that any practical wisdom and rank of nobility must be built upon a popular base.

Now, the most important thing in *S. th.*, I-II, q. 105, a. 1 is that in the dialectic between ‘differentiation’ and ‘unification’ of political functions within the same community, the final word is given to that *common participation* in the good of the polis by the diverse orders: what is shared is principal with respect to what separates or distinguishes these strata; that is, what hierarchizes them. Moreover, if, as referred to in *S. th.*, I-II, q. 105, a. 1, ad 3, a divided kingdom is destined for ruin, it is logical to conclude that the division or fracturing of a political community is to some extent the effect of the lack of participation of its component parts; and more concretely, the lack of social friendship. Indeed, the concept of ‘political

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as a whole.” From this interpretation it is clear that, because political authority fundamentally resides in the community, and is delegated by it to the individuals who rule, it explains the fact that although some men are naturally more apt to rule than others, this does not imply that nature or some divine mandate confers political authority upon them.

participation’—core of the argument in *S. th.*, I-II, q. 105, a. 1<sup>29</sup>— inexorably translates into certain “vital dynamism and the internal creative force of society,” which concretely yields the concept of ‘social or civic friendship,’ as Maritain pointed out (1944, p. 22). Indeed, ‘friendship’ is that “which lies at the origin of the social community,” justice and law not being sufficient in this respect. And it is also something that introduces an egalitarian dynamism capable of crossing all strata and structures of society, awakening in the members of the community the recognition of the other as a fellow human being:

this very development of justice and friendship is linked to a *progress of equality among men* [...]. I am thinking of the progress in the consciousness of each one of us of *our fundamental equality and of our communion in human nature*; and I am thinking of the progress of that proportional equality which justice causes to exist when it treats every one in the manner he deserves, and, above all, every man as a man.<sup>30</sup>

In this way, social friendship is that which decisively contributes to the development of that

*leaven of equality* which has been working within human society -since the coming of the Gospel, in fact- and which does not tend to lower all men to the same level, but rather -by relationships of justice, by the recognition of the rights proper to each, and by *an ever wider participation* of all in the material and spiritual good of the common heritage- to establish between them that *equality* and that *proximity* which are at the root of friendship.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Note that the concept of “the unity of multitude, which we call peace (*multitudinis autem unitas que pax dicitur*)” present in St. Thomas Aquinas (1979, p. 65; *De Regno*, II, 4, lin. 55; see lin. 56-62), would complement this other concept of ‘participation.’ Certainly, the unity or cohesion of a people, which manifests the internal harmony among its parts, is enabled by the participation of those parts. This latter is seen as the active cause of that other state, of a more passive nature.

<sup>30</sup> Maritain (1944, p. 23, my emphasis).

<sup>31</sup> Maritain (1944, pp. 23-24, my emphasis).

It is for this reason that Thomas Aquinas' theory of justice and friendship "holds also to the fundamental rôle of *equality*, not only the *equality of nature*, which is at the root, but the *equality to be won* as an offspring of justice and as a fruit of the common good flowing back over all."<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, the fully participatory mode of government is associated with a specific disposition in the way of governing (*ordinatio principuum/principatum*, according to *S. th.*, I-II, q. 105, a. 1), insofar as the form of specifying the political-constitutional regime that supports it (*species regiminis*, *S. th.*, I-II, 105, a. 1) must be that of a mixed regime ("as though it were a mixture of all the aforementioned regimes," *regimen quasi commixtum ex omnibus predictis regiminibus*, as stated in *Super Pol.*, II, 7, lin. 72-74), that is, where "one regime is restrained by the admixture of another (*unum regimen temperetur ex ammixtione alterius*)," and where "all have a share in the government of the city—as though in some part, the people have mastery, in another the powerful, and in another the king (*omnes [populus, potentes et rex] habeant partem in principatu ciuitatis*)."<sup>33</sup>

It is relevant to point out here the existence of two distinct levels of analysis regarding Aquinas's characterization of government. For one thing is the political *way* or regime (*regimen politicum*), that is, the fact that the ruler is limited by a legal order (as opposed to absolutism, *regimen regale*, in which the will of the monarch constitutes the law of the political community),<sup>34</sup> and another thing is the *form* of participation in government, as

<sup>32</sup> Maritain (1944, p. 24, my emphasis, except the first word). It is important not to lose sight of the epochal context in which Aquinas formulates his theory of friendship: "The quarrel of the friars and the university bring into focus two voluntary associations of equals, held together not by ties of loyalty and obedience to an individual but by participation in the society as a whole. Both the University of Paris and the Order of Preachers had a highly developed sense of community; but they were merely two instances of the assertion of a communal identity by groups of men in every part of Europe: by towns, guilds, confraternities, by diocesan chapters, by professional groups such as lawyers or physicians. The communal movement was legitimized by the lawyers' concept of a corporation (*universitas*)" (Catto, 1976, p. 11).

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Aquinas, 2028, <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~Polit.Bk2.L7.v1266a26.7>; *Super Pol.*, II, 7, lin. 75-79.

<sup>34</sup> Indeed, apart from the bad political governance that constitutes the despotic government (*principatus despoticus*) (*Super Pol.*, III, 3, lin. 177-179; *cfr. ibid.*, I, 3, lin. 145-160; *S. th.*, I, q. 81, a. 3, ad 2), the rule of a perfect human community, that is, the political community (*ciuitas*), can be of two kinds, namely, kingly or political: "there is a kingly rule (*regale regimen*) when he who is foremost in the city has a fullness of power

analyzed in *S. th.*, I-II, q. 105, a. 1. In more current terms, one thing is the republican type of government (*regimen politicum*) and another the democratic type (*politicus principatus*).<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, even though this distinction is necessary, in Thomas's judgment, democracy or, more precisely, the 'mixed monarchy' as the best form of political constitution, seems to be the most favorable condition to achieve a republican regime, that is, one that gives prominence to the rule of law.<sup>36</sup>

Diving deeper into the more concrete meaning of participation in the exercise of power postulated by Thomas Aquinas, Blythe (1986, p. 560) interprets that the role assigned

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(*plenariam potestatem*)”, that is, “when a human being is foremost simply and according to *all* things (*preest simpliciter et secundum omnia*)”; instead, “there is political rule (*politicum regimen*) when he who is foremost in the city has power that is confined (*potestatem coartatam*) by the laws of the city (*aliquas leges ciuitatis*)” (Thomas Aquinas, 2028, <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~Polit.Bk1.L1a.v1252b24.13>; *Super Pol.*, I, 1/a, lin. 67-72 y lin. 106-107; *cfr.* Blythe, 1986, p. 553). What does it mean for a ruler to have its power restricted “by the laws of the city” or, as it says a few lines later (lin. 109-110), “laws put in place through the discipline of politics” (*leges positas per disciplinam politicam*)? That these rules or laws are suitable to bind even the ruler—no matter if he were a king—, also making him in part subject to the law. Thus, in a ‘political’ type regime (*regimen politicum*), the one who presides is “as though he were in part governor, namely, as regards those things that come under his power, and were in part subject, namely, in those things to which he is subjected by the laws (*sit subiectus quantum ad ea in quibus subicitur legi*)” (Thomas Aquinas, 2028, <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~Polit.Bk1.L1a.v1252b24.21>; *Super Pol.*, I, 1/a, lin. 110-113). In a ‘kings’ regime, there is no such submission of the ruler to something superior, namely, a legal norm or a person. Furthermore, it should be noted that, in Aquinas’ view (based on Aristotle’s text), while achieving virtuous governance under absolutism (*regimen regale*) is difficult, it is not entirely impossible.

<sup>35</sup> The essence of the political regime (*regimen politicum*) is the fact that the ruler is bound to a legal order external to his will, and not the fact that there is alternation in the actors who exercise the power of command. The latter, certainly, is of the essence of the *respublica* (democratic form of government), what Aquinas calls “political government” (*politicus principatus*) (*Super Pol.*, I, 10, lin. 77). In other words, while the *regimen politicum* emphasizes the subjection of the ruler to the law and, therefore, its distinction from a *regimen regale*, the *politicus principatus*, for its part, alludes to the equality of the members of the political community, who must hold government office on a rotating basis: “in political governments (*in politicis principatibus*), the persons of the governor and the subject are changed over: for those who are in the office of the governor for one year are subordinates in the others; and this happens because this sort of government (*talem principatum*) is agreeable only among those who are equal following nature, and in no way differ naturally, but nevertheless, differ for a time in which one governs, and the others are subjects. Human industry invented a certain difference, both with regard to figure, which consists in external badges, and also in conversation, because they are named otherwise than before, and men address them differently; and likewise with respect to honors, because citizens display a certain reverence for those who are in a government which they did not display before” (Thomas Aquinas, 2028, <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~Polit.Bk1.L10.v1260a24.19>; *Super Pol.*, I, 10, lin. 59-72).

<sup>36</sup> *Cfr.* Blythe (1986, p. 557). Conversely, Finnis (1998, p. 263) interprets that only under a rule of law, that is, a republican regime, could exist the necessary constitutional dispositions for a genuinely democratic government, or even a genuinely aristocratic one, namely, not degenerating into anarchy, oligarchy, plutocracy, or something similar.

to the people in the mixed regime of *S. th.*, I-II, q. 105, a. 1, is restricted to the *election* of the king and the aristocrats, thus excluding popular participation in the very exercise of government. Of course, the *indirect nature* of such participation would be mitigated by the consideration that—as Tierney observed—the medieval theory, including that of Thomas, was already aware of the existence of “a complex central government” (typical of monarchies) that “derives its authority from the consent of the people” (Tierney, 1979: 4; *cfr.* Finnis, 1998, p. 266). In this case, Blythe and Tierney conclude, it should not be forgotten that such consent (*consensus*) represents a certain form of power. Now, let us recall the way in which Aquinas expressed in *S. th.*, I-II, q. 105, a. 1, and we will find that, if the optimal constitution of political government was indeed that of a monarchy aided by a group of nobles, “yet,” as Thomas immediately adds, “a government of this kind is shared by all (*talis principatus ad omnes pertinet*),” not only “because the rulers are chosen by all (*ab omnibus eliguntur*),” but—what is decisive here—“because all are eligible to govern (*ex omnibus eligi possunt*).” And a bit later he insisted on the same idea: the inclusion of “democracy, i.e., government by the people” in “the best form of polity (*optima politia*)” means that “rulers can be chosen from the people (*ex popularibus possunt eligi principes*),” adducing as a historical example of such an ideal political state that the democratic element (*democraticum*) was in fact part of the government of the people of Israel, as the successors of Moses “were chosen from all the people (*de omni populo eligebantur*).” Thus, it is clear that, in Thomas’s view, it is not merely that the people have the possibility to vote, but also that kings are elected from among the people themselves. And this certainly cannot but constitute a certain popular participation in the very exercise of government.

And if we go to the *Commentary on Aristotle's Politics*, Thomas notes there—in a non-condemnatory manner—the Aristotelian observation that, given a political community composed of citizens of equal or similar ethical condition, that is, when “all the citizens are almost equal following natural industry and virtue (*omnes ciues fere sunt equales secundum naturalem industriam et uirtutem*), then it is just that all participate in the government (*iustum*

*est quod omnes participant principatu).<sup>37</sup>* In this case, where the social condition of the citizens is conceived in a more egalitarian or homogeneous way than in the case of a medieval kingdom, the political participation of all those citizens very similar to one another is clearly revealed as the chance that any of the citizens may hold the office of government, beyond the capacity to exercise a mere *vote* in the election of their representatives, or to exhibit a mere *consensus* regarding the government actions of the latter.

In conclusion, just as, regarding the specifically human equality among all men, any inequality due to physical exercise, wealth, beauty, or even moral merit, is secondary, the same happens regarding political equality. For while hierarchical functioning is essential to the political community as an organism—with some functions being superior, others middle, and others inferior—, political equality among all citizens is affirmed by Aquinas insofar as it is postulated that the power to legislate and rule themselves belongs fundamentally to the entire political community (*tota multitudo*).

Therefore, tyranny, which is the worst form of political arrangement (*tyrannis est pessima corruptio regiminis*, *S. th.*, I-II, q. 105, a. 1, arg. 5), should not be understood by Thomas only in the sense of a positive enslavement of the subjects (*tyranni suis subditis principiantur ut servis*, *S. th.*, I-II, q. 105, a. 1, ad 5), but also as a disguised subterfuge that seeks to deactivate popular participation in the power of the polis; especially discouraging friendship and cooperation among the governed.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Aquinas, 2028, <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~Polit.Bk2.L1.v1261b10.69>; *Super Pol.*, II, 1, lin. 287-290.

<sup>38</sup> “Conantur igitur praedicti tyranni [...] ne inter subditos amicitiae foedus firmetur et pacis emolumento ad invicem gaudeant, ut sic dum unus de altero non confidit” (*De regno*, I, c. 3, lin. 89-95). Unlike tyrants who destroy friendship among citizens and foment factions of all kinds, the true king is one who seeks to promote concord or friendship, insofar as through this the promotion of virtue and social order is achieved (*cfr. De regno*, I, c. 10, lin. 18-20; McCormick, 2022, pp. 65-69).

## Conclusion

To conclude, I will note some issues that seem worthy of emphasis regarding the way Thomas evaluates the interaction of ‘inequality’ among men and the two trifunctionalities examined—the social and the political—along with his consideration *de iure* and *de facto*.

*Inequality and the rule of men in general.* If the best men, that is, those who have prospered both technically and morally, are in principle the most fit to rule the community to which they belong, and thus are *de iure* the rulers of that community, that is, those who have the right or natural aptitude to do so—‘right’ therefore meaning what belongs to someone in justice—it does not mean that they necessarily do so *de facto*. Indeed, at the moment of forming the effective organization of the political community, and thus determining the natural right, the moment of freedom, deliberation, and consensus by the members of a community is decisive for St. Thomas.

*Inequality and socio-political trifunctionality.* The diversity of social ‘functions’ (*officia*) that constitute the organicity of a community constitutes in some way the diversity of orders or degrees (*ordines vel gradus*) of any well-constituted society. Now, although the aristocrats (*optimates*), who are at the top of the social scale and might be identified politically with the judges (*ordo iudicantium*), occupy ‘the highest’ of society, it does not mean that they are the ‘best’ from a moral point of view. Such identification would be gratuitous. It may be that, in fact, those *optimates* are people without moral virtue or merit, and, in this case, that the aristocracy *de facto* becomes an oligarchy. In this sense, Aquinas’ philosophy postulates a genuine meritocracy, that is, the defense that the achievement of human perfection is not tied to any specific type of profession or social *officium*; or, conversely, that it is not impeded by any specific professional dedication. So, alongside the need to postulate an objective structural inequality, there is simultaneously recognized, regarding human work dedication, the postulation of equal opportunity for moral merit, which is the most human kind of merit.

*Inequality and political-constitutional trifunctionality.* First, if political equality is verified in an ideal common participation in power, it must be translated into the consensus achieved by the ruler with the people, that is, the degree of voluntary acceptance or recognition of the office and actions of the former by the people. The mixed form of government, that is, the combination of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, undoubtedly helps constitutionally in the exercise of such participation by all. Now, the fullest expression of political participation in a community is the exercise of social friendship, which strengthens cooperation among citizens and particularly fosters the experience of fundamental equality among men.

On the other hand, following Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas is capable of imagining a society of equal or very similar beings, where there are few ethical and economic differences among the members of the political community. In such a society, ‘political mobility,’ that is, alternation in the head of government, would become necessary:

it would be just (*iustum esset*), if it were possible, that all should govern at the same time (*omnes simul principarentur*): but because this is not possible, as an imitation of this justice, it is observed that those who are equals in part yield to each other the position (*illi qui sunt eequales in parte sibi inuicem cedant*), although from the principle of their rule they were similar: because while some of them govern, and some are subject (*quidam eorum principantur et quidam subiciuntur*), in a certain manner they are made dissimilar and diverse through the degree of dignity [of the office] (*dissimiles et diuersi per gradum dignitatis*).<sup>39</sup>

Noting with Aristotle the need for this political mobility, Thomas suggests a very “modern” approach to social mobility. Indeed, if in a society there had to be circulation of citizens occupying government office, insofar as none particularly stands out for such exercise

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Aquinas, 2028, <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~Polit.Bk2.L1.v1261b10.69>; *Super Pol.*, II, 1, lin. 293-301.

(political mobility), likewise one could think of alternation in the different types of work or offices that make up the economy of a political community (social mobility): “as if in some city, the same men were not always tanners or builders (*coriarii uel fabri*), but that it followed by turn (*uicissim*) that all citizens (*omnes ciues*) would become tanners and builders.”<sup>40</sup> This is certainly an example. But in postulating it, the likelihood is acknowledged that there exists such type of circulation—by *all* members of society—through the lowest employments of the social scale. That is, in a society composed of men of very similar ethical condition, no one would be prohibited from working at anything, doing whatever it takes, even doing jobs that in principle one might consider lowly<sup>41</sup>. And why not think of the inverse example, namely, that in such a society anyone could do jobs belonging to the highest offices of the social scale—such as judging or warring—as well as, in relation to the political sphere, Thomas, drawing on the Stagirite, exposes the need for all to govern alternately (*uicissitudinarium*)? In this case, political inequality among equal citizens would be manifestly secondary and artificially manufactured, due to the necessity that, effectively, in any community so constituted, the inequality of functions between governors and governed cannot be eluded.

Certainly, it is not about breaking or dissolving the organic structures of society, which for St. Thomas, as we have seen, form a certain hierarchy—according to the establishment of the superior, the middle, and the inferior—but about allowing citizens

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Aquinas, 2028, <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~Polit.Bk2.L1.v1261b10.68>; *Super Pol.*, II, 1, lin. 278-280.

<sup>41</sup> Speaking generally of the entire human community, Thomas teaches—as paraphrased by Hanson (2024, p. 9)—that “someone has to be a parent, an inventor, an architect, or a farmer, but nobody in particular can be *all* of these things, and nobody in particular *must* be *any* of them.” It follows that, in a homogeneously constituted community, while no one is obliged to practice a particular profession or hold a particular office, anyone could practice any of them without difficulty. Bringing this thesis to light is of particular importance insofar as, at the end of the Middle Ages, began to emerge “an increasing tendency to separate the forms of life,” and with it “that a closer alliance between the refined height of spiritual life and the practice of manual labor would be harder to sustain.” If, as Robert Kilwardby openly postulated in his *De ortu scientiarum*, “physical activity is more suited to insignificant and common people, the peace of meditation and study to the noble elite; in this way, everyone has an occupation fitting his station of life” (cit. in Hanson, 2024, p. 13), then “the very idea that one could have such a station, that one could be fit for certain kinds of work and not for others, is a radical departure [from the more egalitarian medieval thought], one that would have a lasting impact on modernity and beyond” (Hanson, 2024, p. 13).

homogeneously constituted to move or circulate through them. This constitution specifically refers to a similar ethical virtue or manners involved in the social, economic, and political sphere. It does not refer to the virtue of individual moral merit, or supernatural virtues. It implies, at least in principle or in a potential way (hence we say that citizens ‘may circulate’ and not directly that they ‘circulate’), the disposition of any citizen to carry out any social, economic, or political task in the socio-political community to which they belong. In this sense, Aquinas is understood to postulate that the progress of society leads to the reduction of inequalities among men. For ‘progress of a society’ specifically means the improvement of the civilizing virtues—civic, social, and economic—of the members of that society; which certainly leads to the realization of that certain homogeneity mentioned, insofar as friendship—as highlighted by Maritain’s interpretation—becomes the central protagonist in such a society.

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