One of the many oddities about al-Fārābī’s work to strike a newcomer is that he did not think of constitutions in political terms. To him, a constitution (for which he used terms such as madīna, city, riyāsa, leadership, and siyāsa, governance) was a society characterized by a particular evaluation of the highest good, not by a particular distribution of power, so that for example an oligarchy was a polity in which wealth was regarded as the ultimate aim in life. To some extent, this is in line with Plato and Aristotle, who also thought of constitutions in much broader terms than is customary today, and Aristotle identified them in terms of their ends as well, giving that of oligarchy as wealth. But “constitution” (politeia) in ancient parlance did include the distribution of power, on which the modern concept focuses, whereas al-Fārābī uses the term to mean no more than a set of beliefs and practices shared by a group, a collective way of life. The government it involved was government of the soul. He did assume that those capable of influencing people’s minds in a particular polity would be rewarded with wealth and power, so that the political organization of that polity would reflect its dominant values, but his interest was entirely in the values. Ordinary government had no aim in itself: either it was just power play or else it was a mere instrument in the service of higher things, and the key question was precisely, what higher things? What values were to prevail in an ideal society? This is what he explored with his different constitutions. The same is true of most later philosophers working under his influence. Ibn Rushd stands out for having put the regimes back into service for political analysis, to be followed in this by Ibn Khaldūn; but in the eastern Islamic world the regimes remained a-political.

* I am indebted to the members of the conference for their comments and suggestions and owe special thanks to Nelly Lahoud, who served as discussant, and Maroun Aouad, who commented on the revised version and suggested that I add charts.


3 See the papers by Maroun Aouad and Abdesselam Cheddadi in this volume [Ed.: Aouad, “Does Averroes Have a Philosophy of History?,” Mélanges de l’Université Saint-Joseph 57,
Al-Fārābī was greatly exercised by his a-political constitutions, and not just by the “virtuous” variety (meaning that devoted to happiness as understood by the philosophers). He dealt with imperfect regimes in at least seven of his books. What was he trying to say? Why did he keep reformulating his views? How had constitutions come to be seen as cultural orientations, and in general, how does his thought relate to that of late antiquity? In what follows I shall go through his statements with these questions in mind.

(1) *Fuṣūl*, First Passage

The simplest of al-Fārābī’s pictures consists of cities of two types, the necessity city (*al-madīna al-ḍarūriyya*) and the virtuous city (*al-madīna al-fāḍila*). In the necessity city people cooperate to secure their basic needs, no more. In the virtuous city they cooperate to secure something more as well, namely the best of all things (*afḍal al-ashyāʾ*), which they regard as the true purpose of human existence. What might that be? Some, we are told, define the best of all things as the enjoyment of pleasure (*al-tamattuʿ biʾl-ladḥāt*), while others hold it to be wealth (*al-yasār*), or a combination of the two; but Socrates and Plato held the best of all things to be moral perfection in this life and ultimate happiness in the hereafter, and the virtuous city to them was one in which people cooperated to achieve this goal. This is clearly what it was to al-Fārābī too (§ 25/28).4

Two things may be noted about this passage. First, the basic distinction is not between perfect and imperfect regimes, but rather between those which aim at nothing but the bare necessities and those which aim for more. All those which aim for more are called virtuous (*fāḍila*). Only one of its subtypes is truly virtuous or perfect, but all aim for what is best in the eyes of the inhabitants themselves.

Secondly, al-Fārābī is here sticking close to his sources. Plato starts the discussion of constitutions in his *Politeia* by having Socrates construct a simple city by way of thought experiment. This simple city is fit only for swine in the opinion of Glaucon, so Socrates adds luxuries, comparing the simple city with a man in health and that endowed with luxury to a man in fever: for luxury engenders competition, he explains, meaning that now the city will

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