

primarysourcedocument

The Spirit of the Laws (Montesquieu; excerpts)

The Spirit of the Laws (Montesquieu; excerpts)

The Spirit of the Laws

(Excerpts)

By Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu

1748

Translated by Thomas L. Pangle

[Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat, Baron de. *L'Ésprit des Lois*. 1748. Translated by Thomas L. Pangle.]

Bk. 3, chap. 1

The Greek political thinkers, who lived in governments of the people, recognized no other force which could sustain them except that of virtue. Today's political thinkers speak to us solely of manufactures, of commerce, of finances, or riches, and even of luxury. When that virtue ceases, ambition enters the hearts of those who can receive it, and avarice enters the hearts of everyone.

Bk. 4, chap. 5

It is in republican government that one has need of the complete power of education. . . . the honor that animates monarchies is favored by the passions, and favors them in return; but political virtue is a self-renunciation, which is always something very unpleasant. One can define that virtue, as the love of the laws and the fatherland. This love, demanding a continual preference of the public interest to one's own interest, gives all the individual virtues; they are nothing but that preference.

Bk. 4, chap. 6

The ancient Greeks, penetrated by the necessity that peoples who live under a government of the people were raised to virtue, made, in order to inspire it, singular institutions. . . . Lycurgus seemed to take away from the city all resources, all arts, commerce, money, walls; there one had ambition, without hope of bettering oneself; one had natural feelings, and one was neither child, nor husband, nor father: shame itself was taken away from chastity. . . .

It is extraordinary that what one sees in the institutions of Greece, we have seen in the dregs and the corruption of our modern times. An honest lawgiver has formed a people where probity would appear as natural as bravery among the Spartans. Mr. Penn is a true Lycurgus; and, although the first had peace for his object, as the other had war, they resemble one another in the singular path they put their people on, in the ascendancy they obtained over free men, in the prejudices that they vanquished, in the passions that they dominated. . . .

The Spirit of the Laws (Montesquieu; excerpts)

Published on Natural Law, Natural Rights, and American Constitutionalism (<http://nlmrac.org>)

Those who would wish to make comparable institutions, would establish the community of property of the Republic of Plato, that respect that he demanded for the gods, that separation from strangers in order to preserve the morals, with the city carrying on the commerce, rather than the citizens; they would give our arts without our luxury, and our needs without our desires.

Bk. 11, chap. 4

Democracy and aristocracy are not free States by their nature. Political liberty is found only in moderate governments. . . . it an eternal experience that every person who has some power is carried away to the abuse of it; he goes on until he finds limits. Who would declare it! Virtue itself has need of limits.

Bk. 20, chap. 1

Commerce cures destructive prejudices; and this is almost a general rule—that wherever there are soft morals, there is commerce; and that wherever there is commerce, there are soft morals.

Let no one be astonished at all then if our morals are less ferocious than they were in earlier times. Commerce has made it so that the knowledge of the morals of all the nations has penetrated everywhere: they have been compared one with the other, and there has resulted great good.

One can say that the laws of commerce perfect the morals, for the very same reason that these same laws destroy the morals. Commerce corrupts pure morals: this was the subject of the complaints of Plato; commerce polishes and softens barbarian morals, as we are seeing everyday.

Original Author Sort: Montesquieu

Publication Date: 11748.00.00.##

Topic: [Natural Law and Natural Rights in the American Constitutional Tradition](#)

Subtopic: [The Bill of Rights](#)

Publication Date Range: 1748

Source URL: <http://nlmrac.org/american/bill-of-rights/primary-source-documents/montesquieu>