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VIII.2 On the corruption of the principle of democracy

- The Spirit of Law - Book VIII. On the corruption of the principles of the three governments -

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The principle of democracy becomes corrupt not only when the spirit of equality is lost, but also when the spirit of extreme equality is adopted and everyone wants to be equal to those he chooses to command him. At that point the people, unable to bear the very power they confer, want to do everything themselves : deliberate for the senate, execute for the magistrates, and divest all the judges.

There can no longer be any virtue in the republic. The people want to take over the functions of the magistrates, who are therefore no longer respected. The deliberations of the senate no longer carry any weight, so there is no longer any deference to the senators, nor consequently to the elderly. Now if there is no respect for the elderly, there will be none either for fathers ; husbands no longer deserve deference, nor masters submission. Everyone will come to like this dissolution ; the nuisance of commanding will be tiring, like that of obedience. Wives, children, and slaves will be submissive to no one. It will be the end of morality, of order, and in short of virtue.

We see in Xenophon's *Symposium* a very naive portrait of a republic where the people have abused equality. Each guest in turn gives the reason why he is content with himself. "I am content with myself," says Camides, "because of my poverty. When I was rich, I had to court slanderers, knowing well that I was more in a position to be harmed by them than to do them any harm. The republic was always asking me for some new sum ; I could not hide. Since I have been poor, I have acquired some authority ; no one threatens me ; I threaten others ; I can go or stay. Already the rich rise from their seats and let me pass before them ; I am a king. I was a slave, I paid a tribute to the republic ; today the republic feeds me ; I no longer fear losses, I hope to make acquisitions."

The people fall into this unhappy state when those whom they trust, trying to hide their own corruption, seek to corrupt them. To keep their ambition from showing, they speak to them only about their greatness ; to keep their avarice from being perceived, they endlessly flatter that of the people themselves.

Corruption will increase among the corrupters, and it will increase among those who are already corrupt. The people will divide up all the public monies ; and as they will have added to their indolence the management of business, they will want to add to their poverty the amusements of luxury. But with their indolence and their luxury, the public treasury is the only thing that will interest them.

We must not be surprised if we see votes traded for money. You cannot give much to the people without getting even more from them ; but in order to get something from them, you must overturn the state. The more they appear to take advantage of their freedom, the closer they will be to the moment when they must lose it. Soon what freedom remains becomes unbearable ; a single tyrant arises, and the people lose everything, even the advantages of corruption.

Democracy thus has two excesses to avoid : the spirit of inequality, which leads it to aristocracy or to government by one man alone ; and the spirit of extreme equality, which leads it to the despotism of one man alone, as the despotism of one man alone ends in conquest.

It is true that those who corrupted the Greek republics did not always become tyrants. That is because they were more skilled in eloquence than in military art, besides the fact that in the heart of all Greeks there was an implacable hatred for those who were overturning the republican government, for which reason anarchy degenerated into nothing rather than turn into tyranny.

But Syracuse, which was situated in the midst of a large number of small oligarchies that had turned into tyrannies, [1] Syracuse, which had a senate [2] which is hardly ever mentioned in history, experienced misfortunes not caused by ordinary corruption. That city, always either licentious [3] or oppressed, tormented both by its freedom and by its

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servitude, ever absorbing the one and the other like a tempest, and despite its external power, repeatedly tipped into a revolution by the smallest outside force, embraced an immense population, which never had any but this cruel alternative : to give themselves a tyrant, or to be one themselves.

[1] See Plutarch in the lives of Timoleon and Dio.

[2] That of the six hundred, of which Diodorus speaks.

[3] After ridding themselves of the tyrants, they made strangers and mercenary soldiers citizens, which caused civil wars (Aristotle, *Politics*, book V, ch. iii). The people having been the reason for the victory over the Athenians, the republic was changed (*ibid.*, chap. iv). The passion of two young magistgrates, one of whom took a young boy from the other, who then seduced his wife, had the form of this republic changed (*ibid.*, book VII, ch. iv).