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X.4 Some advantages of the conquered people

- The Spirit of Law - Book X. On the laws in their relation to offensive strength -

Date de mise en ligne : mardi 4 septembre 2018

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X.4 Some advantages of the conquered people

Instead of deducing such fatal consequences from the right of conquest, political thinkers would have done better to evoke the advantages which that right can sometimes confer on the defeated people. They would have been more sensitive to them if our law of nations were exactly followed, and if it were established throughout the world.

States which are conquered are not ordinarily at the strength of their inception. Corruption has come in ; the laws have ceased to be executed ; the government has become oppressive. Who can doubt that such a state would gain, and derive some advantages even from conquest, if it was not destructive ? What would a government that had reached the point where it can no longer reform itself have to lose by being overhauled ? A conqueror who enters among a people where by a thousand ruses and artifices the rich man has progressively practiced infinite means of usurpation ; where the suffering wretch, seeing what he thought of as abuses becoming laws, is oppressed and thinks it is wrong of him to feel it ; a conqueror, I say, can throw everything off, and the muted tyranny is the first thing to suffer violence.

We have, for example, seen states oppressed by tax farmers relieved by a conqueror who had neither the commitments nor the needs of the legitimate prince. The abuses were corrected even without the conqueror correcting them.

Sometimes the frugality of the conquering nation has given it the capacity of leaving to the vanquished the necessities which they had been denied under the legitimate prince.

A conquest can destroy harmful prejudices, and place a nation, if I may put it this way, under a better genie.

What good could the Spaniards not have done the Mexicans ? They had a mild religion to offer them : they brought them prodigious superstition. They could have freed the slaves, and they made slaves of free men. They could have undeceived them on the abuse of human sacrifices ; instead of that, they exterminated them. I will have never done if I try to relate all the benefits they did not bring, and all the harm they did.

It is up to a conqueror to repair a part of the harm he has done. This is how I define the right of conquest : a necessary right, legitimate and unfortunate, which always leaves an enormous debt to be paid to acquit oneself toward humanity.