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## XVII.3 On the climate of Asia

- The Spirit of Law - Book XVII. How the laws of political servitude are related to the nature of the climate -

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The relations tell us that the north of Asia, that vast continent that extends from about the fortieth degree to the pole and from the borders of Muscovy to the Oriental Sea, is in a very cold climate ; that this immense terrain is divided from west to east by a chain of mountains that leaves Siberia on the north and Greater Tartary on the south ; that the climate of Siberia is so cold that except for some places it cannot be farmed ; and that although Russians have settlements the whole length of the Irtysh, they raise nothing there ; that nothing grows in this country but a few small firs and shrubs ; that the natives of the country are divided into wretched tribes, which are like the ones in Canada ; that the reason for this cold is, on the one hand, the latitude of the terrain, and on the other from the fact that as you go from south to north the mountains flatten out so that the northerly wind blows everywhere without encountering any obstacles ; that this wind that makes Novaya Zemlya uninhabitable, blowing into Siberia, makes it barren ; that in Europe on the contrary the mountains of Norway and Lapland are wondrous boulevards that cover the northern countries with this wind ; that as a result, in Stockholm, which is at about fifty-nine degrees latitude, the terrain produces fruits, grains, and plants, and that in the vicinity of Oby, which is at sixty-one degrees, as well as around sixty-three and sixty-four degrees, there are silver mines, and the terrain is reasonably fertile. [1]

We see further in the relations that Greater Tartary, which is south of Siberia, is also very cold ; that the country is not farmed ; that there is nothing but grazing lands for herds ; that no trees grow there, but some scrub, as in Iceland ; that there are some regions in the vicinity of China and the Mogul empire where a kind of millet grows, but neither wheat nor rice can mature there ; that there is scarcely any place in Chinese Tartary around the 43rd, 44th, and 45th parallels which does not freeze seven or eight months of the year, so it is as cold as Iceland, although it ought to be warmer than southern France ; that there are no cities, except for four or five near the Oriental Sea, and a few which the Chinese for political reasons have built close to near China ; that in the rest of Greater Tartary there are only a few cities, set in the Boucharies, in Turkistan, and in Charizme ; that the reason for this extreme cold is the nitrous nature of the terrain, sandy and full of saltpeter, and in addition the latitude of the terrain. Father Verbiest had found that a certain spot eighty leagues to the north of the Great Wall, near the source of the Kavanhuram, exceeded the altitude of the seashore near Peking by 3000 geometric feet ; that this altitude [2] is the reason why, although this country is the source of almost all the great rivers of Asia, there is nevertheless a shortage of water, such that it can be inhabited only beside rivers and lakes.

These facts noted, I reason thus : Asia has no real temperate zone, and places situated in a very cold climate are directly adjacent to places that are in a very warm climate, which is to say Turkey, Persia, the Mogul empire, China, Korea, and Japan.

In Europe, contrariwise, the temperate zone is very broad, although it is situated in climates that vary greatly among themselves, there being no similarity between the climates of Spain and Italy and those of Norway and Sweden. But as the climate becomes gradually colder going from south to north, approximately in proportion to the latitude of each country, it happens that each country is more or less like the one next to it, that there is not a notable difference, and that, as I have just said, the temperate zone is very extensive.

Hence it follows that in Asia nations are opposed to nations as strong to weak : warlike peoples, brave and active, are immediately alongside effeminate, indolent, timid peoples ; the one must therefore be conquered, and the other be the conqueror. In Europe, on the contrary, nations are opposed as strong to strong ; neighboring ones have more or less the same courage. That is the major reason for the weakness of Asia and the strength of Europe, the freedom of Europe and the servitude of Asia : a cause that I do not know to have been previously noted. That is why in Asia it never happens that freedom increases, whereas in Europe it increases or diminishes according to the circumstances.

Though the Muscovite nobility has been reduced to servitude by one of its princes, we will always see in them signs of impatience which the southern climates do not impart. Did we not see aristocratic government established there for a few days ? If another northern kingdom has lost its laws, we can rely on the climate : it has not lost them

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irrevocably.

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[1] See *Voyages du Nord*, vol. VIII, the *History of the Tatars*, and the fourth volume of Father du Halde's *China*.

[2] Tartary is therefore like a sort of flat mountain.