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XX.4 On commerce under the various governments

- The Spirit of Law - Book XX. On laws in their relationship with commerce, considered in its nature and its distinctions -

Date de mise en ligne : jeudi 6 septembre 2018

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XX.4 On commerce under the various governments

Commerce has a relationship with the constitution. With the government of one man alone, it is based on luxury, and its sole purpose is to obtain for the nation that engages in it everything that can serve its pride, its delights and its fantasies. In a plural government, it is ordinarily based on economy. The merchants, who keep an eye on all the nations of the earth, transport to one what they obtain from the other. That is how the republics of Tyre, Carthage, Athens, Marseille, Florence, Venice, and Holland practiced commerce.

This kind of traffic involves the plural government by its nature, and monarchical government by opportunity. For as it is based only on the practice of earning little, and even of earning less than any other nation, and of compensating itself only by earning continually, it is hardly possible for it to be practiced by a people among whom luxury is established, who spend much, and see only objects of grandeur.

It was with these thoughts that Cicero said so well : "I do not like to see a single people at once ruler and agent of the entire world." [1] Indeed we would have to suppose that every individual in this state, and even the whole state, always had his head full of grand projects, and that same head filled with small ones, which is contradictory.

It is not that, in those states that subsist by commerce of economy, the greatest enterprises are not also undertaken, and that they do not have a boldness not found in monarchies ; and here is why.

One kind of trade leads to another, small to modest, modest to large ; and he who has been so desirous of earning a little puts himself in a situation where he is no less desirous of earning much.

Besides, the great enterprises of dealers are always necessarily admixed with public business. But in monarchies public business is as suspect to merchants as they think it reliable in free states. Great commercial enterprises are therefore not for monarchies, but for republican states.

In a word, the greater certainty of their property which they think they have in these states encourages all sorts of enterprises ; and because they are sure of what they have acquired, they dare to risk it to acquire more ; their only risk relates to the means of acquiring, for men have great expectations for their fortune.

GENERAL RULE. In a nation which is in servitude, people work harder to preserve than to acquire. In a free nation, they work harder to acquire than to preserve.

[1] *Nolo eundem populum, imperatorem et portitorem esse terrarum.*