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XIX.12 On the manners and morals of the despotic state

- The Spirit of Law - Book XIX. On the laws in the relation they have to the principles that constitute the general spirit, the morals, and the manners of a nation -

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It is a capital maxim that one must never change morals and manners in the despotic state ; nothing would be more swiftly followed by a revolution. That is because in these states there are, so to speak, no laws ; there are only morals and manners, and if you overthrow those, you overthrow everything.

Laws are established, morals are inspired ; the latter adheres more closely to the general spirit, the former more to a particular institution ; but it is as dangerous, and more so, to overthrow the general spirit as to change a particular institution.

There is less communication in the countries where everyone, both as superior and as inferior, exercises and bears an arbitrary power, than in those where freedom reigns at all ranks. Therefore there is less change in manners and morals. Manners which are more fixed are more similar to laws. Therefore a prince or a legislator there must go against morals and manners less than in any country on earth.

Women there are usually confined and have no tone to set. In other countries where they live alongside men, because of their desire to please, and the desire of others to please them as well, manners are continually changing. The two sexes spoil each other, each losing its distinctive and essential quality ; an arbitrary element comes into what was absolute, and manners change every day.