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XIX.14 What are the natural means of changing a nation's morals and manners

- 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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We have said that laws were particular and precise institutions of the legislator, and the morals and the manners institutions of the nation as a whole. Whence it follows that when you want to change morals and manners, you should not do it by laws, which would appear too tyrannical ; it is better to change them with other morals and manners.

Thus, when a prince wishes to make great changes in his nation, he needs to reform by the laws what is established by the laws, and change by manners what is established by manners ; and it is a very bad policy to change by laws what should be changed by manners.

The law that obliged the Muscovites to have their beards and clothing shortened, and the violence of Peter I, who had the long robes of people entering the cities cut off at the knee, were tyrannical. There are means for preventing crimes, which are penalties ; there are means for changing manners, which are examples.

The ease and rapidity with which this nation has imposed order on itself has shown clearly that that prince had too low an opinion of it, and that these peoples were not animals, as he used to say. The violent means he brought to bear were unnecessary ; he would have achieved his goal just as well by gentler means.

He himself experienced the ease of such changes. The women, confined, were slaves of a sort ; he called them to the court, had them dressed in the German manner, and sent them fabrics. The sex immediately took a liking to a way of life that so flattered their taste, their vanity, and their passions, and they made the men appreciate it too.

What made this change easier was that the morals of the time were foreign to the climate, and had been brought there by the blending of nations and by conquests. Pierre I, in giving the morals and manners of Europe to a European nation, encountered an openness he did not himself expect. The influence of the climate is the first influence of all.

Therefore he had no need of laws to change the morals and the manners of his nation ; all he needed to do was to inspire other ethos and other manners.

In general, people are very attached to their customs ; to suppress them brutally is to make them unhappy : therefore you should not change them, but get them to make the changes themselves.

All effort that does not derive from necessity is tyrannical. The law is not a pure act of authority : things that are inherently indifferent are not its business.