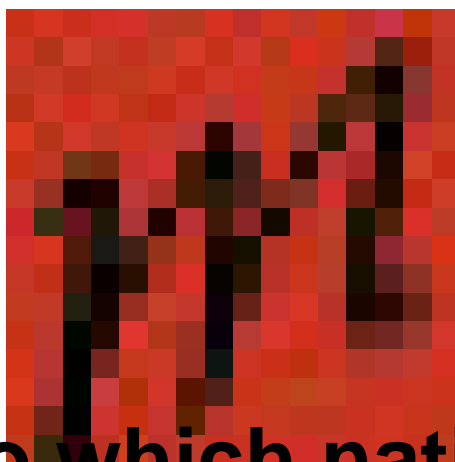


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# XX.21 To which nations it is disadvantageous to engage in commerce

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

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## XX.21 To which nations it is disadvantageous to engage in commerce

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Wealth consists in lands or movable assets ; the lands in every country are ordinarily owned by its inhabitants. Most states have laws that deter foreigners from acquiring their lands. Indeed only the presence of the landlord can properly exploit them : this kind of wealth therefore belongs to each state separately. But mobile assets, such as money, notes, bills of exchange, stock in companies, vessels, all kinds of merchandise, belong to the entire world, which in this relationship constitutes one single state of which all societies are the members ; the people that possesses the most of these mobile world assets is the wealthiest. Some states have an immense quantity of them ; they each acquire them with their products, with the labor of their workers, with their enterprise, their discoveries, and even by chance. The avarice of nations vies for the mobile assets of the entire world. There might be a state so unfavored as to be deprived of the assets of other countries, and further, even of almost all of its own : there the owners of land will be just colonialists of foreigners. That state will be short of everything and unable to acquire anything ; it would be much better off having no trade with any nation on earth : it is trade which, in its circumstances, has led it to poverty.

A country that always ships out less merchandise or commodities than it takes in keeps itself in balance by impoverishing itself : it will take in less and less until, in extreme poverty, it takes in nothing more.

In trading countries, the money that has suddenly vanished returns, because the states that have received it also owe it ; but in the states of which we are speaking, the money never returns, because those who have taken it owe nothing.

Poland will serve as example here. She has almost none of the things that we are calling mobile global assets, except perhaps the grains from her fields. Some lords own entire provinces ; they press the laborer so as to obtain a larger quantity of grain which they can send abroad and procure for themselves the things which their luxury requires. If Poland did not trade with any nation, its people would be better off. Its grandees, who would have only their grain, would give it to their peasants to live on ; they would find unduly large domains burdensome : they would divide them up among their peasants ; with everyone having access to pelts or wool in his herds, there would no longer be a huge expenditure to make for clothing ; the grandees, who always love luxury, and who would be able to find it only in their own country, would urge the poor to work. I say that this nation would flourish more, unless she became barbaric, something which the laws could prevent.

Now let us consider Japan. The excessive quantity of what it can take in produces the excessive quantity of what it can ship out : things will be in balance as if importation and exportation were moderate. Moreover, this sort of expansion will produce a thousand advantages for the state : there will be more consumption, more things to which the arts can be applied, more men employed, more means of acquiring might ; there may occur cases where a quick rescue is needed, which a state so abundant can provide better than another. It is unlikely that any country is without superfluous items ; but it is the nature of trade to make superfluous things useful, and useful things necessary. The state will therefore be able to provide the necessary things to a greater number of subjects.

Let us say, then, that it is not the nations that need nothing that lose out by engaging in commerce ; it is those that need everything. It is not the peoples who are self-sufficient, but those who have nothing at home, who find it advantageous to deal with no one.