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III.5 That virtue is not the principle of monarchical government

- The Spirit of Law - Book III. On the principles of the three governments -

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III.5 That virtue is not the principle of monarchical government

In monarchies, politics makes great things happen with as little virtue as it can ; as in the most admirable machines, art uses as few movements, forces and wheels as possible.

The state subsists independently of love of country, of the desire for true glory, of self-renunciation, of the sacrifice of one's dearest interests, and of all those heroic virtues that we find in the Ancients, and about which we have only heard.

Laws there substitute for all those virtues for which there is no need ; the state dispenses you from them : in a sense, an act committed without a sound has no consequences.

Although all crimes are by nature public, we still distinguish truly public crimes from private ones, so called because they are committed more against an individual than against the entire society.

Nevertheless, in republics private crimes are public : that is, they threaten the constitution of the state more than they do individuals ; and in monarchies public crimes are more private : that is, they threaten individual fortunes more than the constitution of the state itself.

I beg the reader take no offense at what I have said : I am repeating what all the histories say. I know very well that it is not rare for princes to be virtuous ; but I am saying that in a monarchy it is very unlikely that the people will be. [1]

Do but read what the historians of all times have said about the courts of monarchs ; do but remember the conversations of men of all countries about the deplorable character of courtiers : these things are not the result of speculation, but of sad experience.

Ambition in idleness, baseness in arrogance, the desire to get rich without work, aversion to truth, flattery, betrayal, treachery, the shirking of all engagements, scorn for the duties of the citizen, fear of the prince's virtue, expectation of his weaknesses ; and more than all that, the perpetual mockery cast on virtue : these represent, I believe, the character of most courtiers, notable in all places and in all times. Now it is most improbable that the principals of a state could be dishonest men and their inferiors men of good will, that the former could be deceivers while the latter merely consent to being dupes.

Now if among the commoners there happens to be some unhappy but upright man, [2] Cardinal de Richelieu, in his *Political Testament*, [3] implies that a monarch must take care not to employ him. [4] So true is it that this government is not driven by virtue !

[1] I am speaking here of political virtue, which is moral virtue in the sense that it tends in general toward the good, very little of the private moral virtues, and none at all of that virtue which relates to revealed truths. This will be seen in book V, ch. ii,

[2] Understand this in the sense of the previous note.

[3] This book was written under the eyes and on the memoirs of Cardinal de Richelieu by Messrs de Bourzeis and, who were attached to him.

[4] One must not, it is written there, make use of people of low station : they are too austere and too difficult.