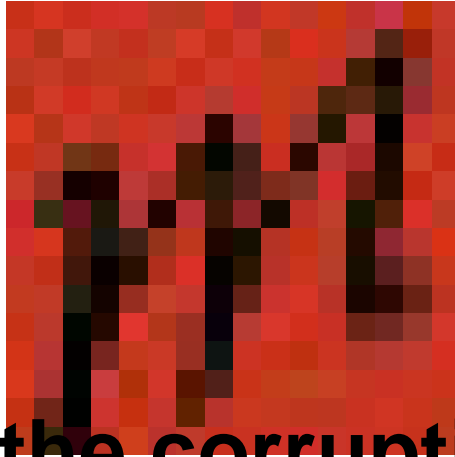


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VIII.5 On the corruption of the principle of aristocracy

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

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VIII.5 On the corruption of the principle of aristocracy

Aristocracy becomes corrupt when the power of the nobles becomes arbitrary ; there can be no more virtue in those who govern, nor in those who are governed.

When the ruling families observe the laws, it is a monarchy with several monarchs, and which is by its nature very good ; almost all those monarchs are bound by the laws. But when they do not observe them, it is a despotic state with several despots.

In this case the republic subsists only with respect to the nobles, and among them only. It lies in the governing body, and the despotic state lies in the governed body, which makes for the two most disunited bodies anywhere.

Extreme corruption is when the nobles become hereditary [1] ; after this they can know no moderation. If they are few in number, their power is greater, but their security declines ; if they are in greater number, their power is lesser and their security greater : and so it is that power keeps growing and security decreasing right up to the despot, on whose head sits the surfeit of power and of danger.

A great number of nobles in the hereditary aristocracy will therefore make the government less violent ; but as there will be little virtue, they will fall into a spirit of nonchalance, of indolence, of insouciance, as a result of which the state will have no more strength or drive. [2]

An aristocracy can maintain the strength of its principle if the laws are such that they make the nobles more aware of the perils and fatigues of command than of its delights, and if the state is in a situation such that it has something to fear, and that security lies within, and uncertainty without.

As a certain confidence is the glory and security of a monarchy, a republic on the contrary must fear something. [3] Fear of the Persians maintained the laws for the Greeks. Carthage and Rome intimidated each other, and strengthened themselves. The strange thing is that the more security states have, the more prone they are, like waters too placid, to being corrupted.

[1] Aristocracy turns into oligarchy.

[2] Venice is one of the republics which thanks to its laws has best corrected the disadvantages of hereditary aristocracy.

[3] Justinus attributes to the death of Epaminondas the extinction of virtue in Athens. Devoid of emulation, they spent their income on festivals, *frequentius scænam quam castra visentes* [more frequently in attendance at table than at camp]. For the time, the Macedonians emerged from obscurity (book VI).