

<http://montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/spip.php?article2797>



XIV.3 Contradiction in the characters of certain southern peoples

- The Spirit of Law - Book XIV. On the laws in their relation to the nature of the climate -

Date de mise en ligne : jeudi 6 septembre 2018

Copyright © Montesquieu - Tous droits réservés

XIV.3 Contradiction in the characters of certain southern peoples

The Indians naturally lack courage [1] ; even the children of Europeans born in the Indies lose the courage of their own climate. [2] But how can we reconcile this with their atrocious acts, their customs, their barbaric forms of penitence ? Men subject themselves there to unbelievable sufferings, the women set fire to themselves : that is a lot of strength for so much weakness.

Nature, which has given those peoples a weakness that makes them timid, has also given them such a lively imagination that everything impresses them to excess. That very organ delicacy that makes them fear death also serves to make them dread a thousand things more than death ; it is the same sensitivity that makes them flee all perils and yet defy them all.

As a good education is more necessary to children than to those whose mind has reached maturity, so the peoples of these climates have greater need of a wise legislator than the peoples of our own. The more easily and strongly one is impressed, the more important it is that it be in the right way, that it not receive prejudices, and that it be led by reason.

In Roman times the peoples of the north of Europe lived without art, without education, almost without laws, and yet by good sense alone attached to the coarse fibers of those climes, they held out with admirable wisdom against Roman might until the time when they emerged from their forests to destroy it.

[1] "A hundred European soldiers," says Tavernier, "would have little trouble beating a thousand Indian soldiers."

[2] Even the Persians who settled in the Indies take on, in the third generation, Indian nonchalance and cowardice : see Bernier on the Mogol, vol. I, p. 282.