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XIX.9 On the vanity and arrogance of nations

- The Spirit of Law - Book XIX. On the laws in the relation they have to the principles that constitute the general spirit, the ethos, and the manners of a nation -

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XIX.9 On the vanity and arrogance of nations

Vanity is as good a resource for a government as pride is a dangerous one. To see this, you only have to imagine, first, the benefits without number that result from vanity : whence luxury, industry, arts, fashion, refinement, and taste ; and second, the infinite harm that arises from the pride of certain nations : indolence, poverty, neglect of everything, the destruction of the nations that have chanced to fall into their hands, and even their own. Indolence [1] is the effect of pride ; work is a consequence of vanity. The Spaniard's pride will make him refuse to work ; the Frenchman's vanity will make him learn how to work better than others.

Every indolent nation is somber, for those who do not work consider themselves the sovereigns of those who do.

Examine all nations, and you will see that in most of them gloom, arrogance, and indolence go together.

The peoples of Achim are proud and indolent [2] ; those who own no slaves hire one, if only to go a hundred paces and carry two pints of rice : they would think themselves dishonored if they carried it themselves.

There are several places on the earth where people let their fingernails grow to make the point that they do not work.

In the Indies, [3] women believe it is shameful for them to learn to read : that is, they say, the business of the slaves who sing hymns in the temples. In one caste they do not spin ; in another they make only baskets and mats, and must not even pound the rice ; in others they must not go fetch water. Pride has established these rules, and they must be followed.

[1] The peoples who follow the khan of Malacamber and those of Carnataca and Coromandel, are proud and indolent ; they consume little, because they are wretchedly poor, whereas the Moguls and the peoples of Hindustan keep busy and enjoy the conveniences of life, like the Europeans. (*Recueil des voyages qui ont servi à l'établissement de la Compagnie des Indes*, vol. I, p. 54.)

[2] See Dampier, vol. III.

[3] *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*, 12th volume, p. 80.