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Sketches Of The History Of Man

In Two Volumes

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Sketch III. Different forms of government compared

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S K E T C H III.

Different FORMS OF GOVERNMENT compared.

OF all governments, democracy is the most turbulent: despotism, which benumbs the mental faculties, and relaxes every spring of action, is in the opposite extreme. Mixed governments, whether monarchical or republican, stand in the middle: they promote activity, but seldom any dangerous excess.

Pure democracy, like that of Athens, Argos, and Carthage, is the very worst form of government, if we make not despotism an exception. The people, in whom resides the sovereign power, are insolent in prosperity, timid in adversity, cruel in anger, blind and prodigal in affection, and incapable of embracing steadily a prudent measure. Thucydides relates (*a*), that Agis with a gallant army of Spartans surrounded the army of Argos; and, tho' secure of victory, suffered them to retreat, upon solemn assurances from Thrasyllus, the Argian general, of terminating all differences in an amicable treaty. Agis, perhaps justly, was bitterly censured for suffering victory to slip out of his hands: but the Argians, dreaming of victory when the danger was over, brought their general to trial, confiscated his effects, and would have stoned him to death, had he not taken refuge in a temple. Two Athenian generals, after one naval victory, being intent on a second, deputed Theramenes to perform

(*a*) Lib. 5.



the last duty to their dead. A violent storm prevented Theramenes from executing the trust reposed in him; but it did not prevent the people of Athens from putting their two generals to death, as if they had neglected their duty. The fate of Socrates is a sad instance, of the changeable, as well as violent, disposition of a democratical state. He was condemned to death, for attempting innovations in the established religion: the sentence was grossly unjust; for he attempted no innovation; but only, among his friends, expressed purer notions of the Deity than were common in Greece at that time. But his funeral obsequies were scarce ended, when bitter remorse seized the people. His accusers were put to death without trial, every person banished who had contributed to the sentence pronounced against him, and his statue was erected in the most public part of the city. The great Scipio, in his camp near Utica, was surrounded with three Carthaginian armies, which waited only for day-light to fall upon him. He prevented the impending blow, by surprising them in the dead of night; which gave him a complete victory. This misfortune, for it could scarce be called bad conduct, provoked the democracy of Carthage, to pronounce sentence of death against Asdrubal their general. Great trading towns cannot flourish, if they be not faithful to their engagements, and honest in their dealings: Whence then the *fides Punica*? A democracy is in its nature rash, violent, and fluctuating; and the Carthaginians merited the reproach, not as individuals, but as a democratical state.

A commonwealth governed by the best citizens, is very different from a democracy, where the mob rules. At the same time, the solid foundation of such a commonwealth, is equality among the citizens. Inequality of riches cannot be prevented in a commercial state; but inequality of privileges may be prevented, by excluding no citizen from the opportunity of commanding as well as of obeying. The invidious distinction of Patrician and Plebeian

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was a gross malady in the Roman republic, a perpetual source of dissension between two bodies of men, equally well born, equally rich, and equally fit for war. This ill-poised government would have put an end to the republic, had not the Plebeians prevailed, who were the more numerous. That reformation produced to Rome plenty of able men, qualified to govern whether in peace or in war.

A commonwealth is the best form of government for a small state: there is little room for inequality of rank or of property; and the people can act in a body. Monarchy is preferable for a large state, where the people, widely spread, cannot be easily collected into a body. Attica was a kingdom, while its twelve cantons were remote from each other, and but slenderly connected. Theseus, by collecting the people of figure into the city of Athens, and by a general assembly of all the cantons held there, fitted Attica to be a commonwealth.

When a nation becomes great and populous, it is ill fitted for being a commonwealth. Ambition is apt to trample upon justice; selfishness upon patriotism; and the public is sacrificed to private views. To prevent corruption from turning incurable, the only remedy is a strict rotation in office, which ought never to be dispensed with on any pretext *. By such rotation, every citizen in his turn governs and is governed: the highest office is limited as to time, and the greatest men in the state must submit to the sacred law of obeying as well as of commanding. A man long accustomed to power, is not happy in a private station: that corrupting habit is prevented by an alternate succession of public and

* A commonwealth with such a rotation may be aptly compared to a group of jets d'eau, rising one above another in beautiful order, and preserving the same order in descending: the form of the group continues invariable, but the forming parts are always changing.



private life ; which is more agreeable by variety, and contributes no less to virtue than to happiness. It was that form of government in ancient Rome, which produced citizens without number, illustrious for virtue and talents. Reflect upon Cincinnatus, eminent among heroes for disinterested love to his country. Had he been a Briton, a seat in parliament would have gratified his ambition, as affording the best opportunity of serving his country. In parliament he joins the party that appears the most zealous for the public. Being deceived in his friends, patriots in name only not in reality, he goes over to the court ; and after fighting the battles of the ministry for years, he is compelled by a shattered fortune to accept a post or a pension. Fortunate Cincinnatus ! born at a time and in a country where virtue was the passport to power and glory. Cincinnatus, after serving with honour and reputation as chief magistrate, cheerfully retired to a private station, in obedience to the laws of his country : nor was that change a hardship on a man who was not corrupted by a long habit of power.

Political writers define a free state to be, where the people are governed by laws of their own making. This definition is lame ; for laws made by the people are not always just. There were many unjust laws enacted in Athens during the democratical government ; and in Britain instances are not wanting of laws, not only unjust, but oppressive. The true definition of a free state, is, where the legislature adheres strictly to the laws of nature ; and calculates every one of its regulations for improving society, and for promoting industry and honesty among the people. If that definition be just, despotism is the worst species of government ; being contrived to support arbitrary will in the sovereign, without regarding the laws of nature, or the good of society. The lawless cruelty of a King of Persia, is painted to the life by a single expression of a Persian grandee, “ That every time he left the King’s
“ apartment,

“apartment, he was inclined to feel with his hand whether his head was on his shoulders.” In the Russian empire, men approach the throne with terror: the slightest political intrigue is a sufficient foundation for banishing the greatest nobleman to Siberia, and for confiscating his estate. The laws of that empire smell no less rank of slavery than of oppression. No person dares game with money that bears the impression of the present sovereign: a man going along the street that fronts the Emperor’s apartment, must pull off his hat; and it is a heinous trespass to write a letter with the Emperor’s name in small characters. Despotism is every where the same: it was high treason to fell a statue of a Roman Emperor; and it was doubted, whether it was not high treason, to hit an Emperor’s statue with a stone thrown at random (*a*). When Elisabeth Empress of Russia was on deathbed, no person durst enquire about her; and even after her death, it was not at first safe to speak of it. The deep silence of the Russians upon matters of government, arises from the encouragement given to accusations of treason. The bystanders must lay hold of the person accused: a father arrests his son, a son his father, and nature suffers in silence. The accused with the accuser are hurried to prison, there to remain till they be tried in the secret court of chancery. That court, composed of a few ministers named by the Emperor, have the lives and fortunes of all at their mercy. The nobility, slaves to the crown, are prone to retaliate upon their inferiors. They impose taxes at pleasure upon their vassals, and frequently seize all at short hand*.

Servility

(*a*) I. 5. ad legem Juliam Majestatis.

* The following incident is a striking example of the violence of passion, indulged in a despotic government, where men in power are under no control. Thomas Pereyra, a Portuguese general, having assisted the King of Pegu in a dangerous

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Servility and depression of mind in the subjects of a despotic government, cannot be better marked than in the funeral rites of a Roman Emperor, described by Herodian (*a*). The body being burnt privately, a waxen image representing the Emperor is laid in a bed of state. On the one side sit the senators several hours daily, clothed in black; and on the other, the most respectable matrons, clothed in white. The ceremony lasts seven days, during which the physicians from time to time approach the bed, and declare the Emperor to be worse and worse. When the day comes of declaring him dead, the most dignified of the nobility carry the bed upon their shoulders, and place it in the old forum, where the Roman magistrates formerly laid down their office. Then begin doleful ditties, sung to his memory by boys and women. These being ended, the bed is carried to the *Campus Martius*, and there burnt upon a high stage with great solemnity. When the flames ascend, an eagle is let loose, which is supposed to carry the soul of the Emperor to heaven. Is that farce less ridiculous than a puppet-show? Is it not much more ridiculous? Dull must have been the spectator who could behold the solemnity without smiling at least, if not laughing outright; but the Romans were crushed by despotism, and nothing could provoke them to laugh. That ridiculous farce continued to be acted till the time of Constantine: how much later, I know not.

ous war with his neighbour of Siam, was a prime favourite at court, having elephants of state, and a guard of his own countrymen. One day coming from court mounted on an elephant, and hearing music in a house where a marriage was celebrating between a daughter of the family and her lover, he went into the house, and desired to see the bride. The parents took the visit for a great honour, and cheerfully presented her. He was instantly smit with her beauty, ordered his guards to seize her, and to carry her to his palace. The bridegroom, as little able to bear the affront as to revenge it, cut his own throat.

(*a*) Lib. 4.



The finest countries have been depopulated by despotism; witness Greece, Egypt, and the Lesser Asia. The river Menam, in the kingdom of Siam, overflows annually like the Nile, depositing a quantity of slime, which proves a rich manure. The river seems to rise gradually as the rice grows; and retires to its channel when the rice, approaching to maturity, needs no longer to be watered. Nature beside has bestow'd on that rich country variety of delicious fruits, requiring scarce any culture. In such a paradise, would one imagine that the Siamites are a miserable people? The government is despotic, and the subjects are slaves: they must work for their monarch six months every year, without wages, and even without receiving any food from him. What renders them still more miserable, is, that they have no protection either for their persons or their goods: the grandees are exposed to the rapacity of the King and his courtiers; and the lower ranks are exposed to the rapacity of the grandees. When a man has the misfortune to possess a tree remarkable for good fruit, he is required in the name of the King, or of a courtier, to preserve the fruit for their use. Every proprietor of a garden in the neighbourhood of the capital, must pay a yearly sum to the keeper of the elephants; otherwise it will be laid waste by these animals, whom it is high treason to molest. From the sea-port of Mergui to the capital, one travels ten or twelve days, through immense plains of a rich soil, finely watered. That country appears to have been formerly cultivated, but is now quite depopulated, and left to tigers and elephants. Formerly, an immense commerce was carried on in that fertile country: historians attest, that in the middle of the sixteenth century above a thousand foreign ships frequented its ports annually. But the King, tempted with so much riches, endeavoured to engross all the commerce of his country; by which means he annihilated successively mines, manufactures, and even agriculture. The country is depopulated,

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and few remain there but beggars. In the island Ceylon, the King is sole proprietor of the land; and the people are supinely indolent: their huts are mean, without any thing like furniture: their food is fruit that grows spontaneously; and their covering is a piece of coarse cloth, wrapped round the middle. The settlement of the Dutch East-India company at the Cape of Good Hope, is profitable to them in their commerce with the East Indies; and it would be much more profitable, if they gave proper encouragement to the tenants and possessors of their lands. But these poor people are ruled with a rod of iron: what the company wants, is extorted from them at so low a price, as scarce to afford them common necessaries. Avarice, like many other irregular passions, obstructs its own gratification: were industry duly encouraged, the product of the ground would be in greater plenty, and goods be afforded voluntarily at a lower price than they are at present obtained by violence. The Peruvians are a sad example of the effects of tyranny; being reduced to a state of stupid insensibility. No motive to action influences them; neither riches, nor luxury, nor ambition: they are even indifferent about life. The single pleasure they feel, is to get drunk, in order to forget their misery. The provinces of Moldavia, Walachia, and Bessarabia, situated between the 43d and 48th degrees of latitude, are defended on three sides by the Niester, the Black sea, and the Danube. The climate of that region, and the fertility of its soil, render it not inferior to any other country in Europe. Its pastures in particular are excellent, producing admirable horses, with an incredible number of sheep and horned cattle; and its industrial fruits, such as corn, wine, oil, honey, and wax, were formerly produced in great plenty. So populous was that region a few centuries ago, that the Prince of Walachia was able, in that province alone, to raise an army of seventy thousand men. Yet, notwithstanding all these advantages, the wretched policy of the Turkish government has



has reduced these provinces to be almost a desert. A despotic government stifles in the birth all the bounties of nature, and renders the finest spots of the globe equally sterile with its barren mountains. When a patriotic king travels about to visit his dominions, he is received with acclamations of joy. A despotic prince dares not hope for such reception: he is locked up in his seraglio, ignorant of what passes; and indolently suffers his people to be pillaged, without even hearing of their distresses.

At the same time, despotism, tho' calculated to elevate the sovereign above the rules of justice, and to make him the only free person in his dominions, tends above all other governments to render him insecure. He becomes odious by oppression; and every hand would be raised against him, but for the restraint of fear. A situation so ticklish, lays him open to every bold spirit, prompted by revenge to seek his ruin, or by ambition to usurp his throne. In that respect, Russia and Turkey are precisely similar: conspiracies against the sovereign are equally frequent, and equally successful. The moment an usurper seizes the palace, all obstructions vanish: all prostrate themselves before the throne, without enquiring about the possessor's title. In that manner was the present Empress of Russia established, notwithstanding a very unfavourable circumstance, that of dethroning her own husband Peter III. No free spirit regrets such events in a despotic government: the only thing to be regretted is, that they concern the monarch only; not the people, who remain abject slaves as formerly. The present Empress, sensible of her precarious situation, is intent to humanize her people, and to moderate the despotism. In that view, she has published a code of laws fit for a limited monarchy, and expressing great regard to the lives, liberties, and property, of her subjects.

But a monarchy, with all the moderation that despotism can



admit, is inconsistent with liberty of the press. Political pamphlets, and even news-papers, are no less useful for instructing the King, than for securing his subjects. In France, the ministry are deprived of that means of acquiring knowledge; and are reduced to the necessity of trusting to insinuating men, who cunningly creep into favour, with a view to their own interest. After the late peace 1763, that ministry formed a plan for establishing a colony in Guiana; and no fewer than twelve thousand persons were landed there all at one time. But so grossly ignorant were they of the preparations necessary for planting a colony in the torrid zone, that contagious diseases, occasioned by unwholesome food, and want of accommodation, left not a single person alive. This could not have happened in England: every article of management would have been canvassed, and light would have broke in from every quarter.

I have insisted longer upon the deplorable effects of despotism than perhaps is necessary; but I was fond of the opportunity to justify, or rather applaud, the spirit of liberty so eminent in the inhabitants of Britain. I now proceed to compare different forms of government, with respect to various particulars; beginning with patriotism. Every form of government must be good that inspires patriotism; and the best form to enliven that noble passion, is a commonwealth founded on rotation of power, where it is the study of those in office, to do good, and to merit approbation from their fellow-citizens. In the Swiss Cantons, the salaries of magistrates and public officers, are scarce sufficient to defray their expences; and those worthy persons desire no other recompense, but to be esteemed and honoured*. A republic so modelled,

* No human work can be everlasting. The seventy-two bailiages of the extensive canton of Bern, threaten ruin to the republic. Those lucrative offices, which
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modelled, inspires virtues of every sort. The people of Switzerland seldom think of a writing to confirm a bargain: a law-suit is scarce known among them; and many there are who have never heard of an advocate nor of an attorney. Their doors are never shut but in winter. It is patriotism that Montesquieu has in view, when he pronounces virtue to be the leading principle in a republic. He has reason to term it so, because patriotism is connected with every social virtue; and when it vanishes, men regard themselves only, not their fellow-citizens. Democracy will never be recommended by any enlightened politician, as a good form of government; were it for no other reason, but that patriotism cannot long subsist where the mob governs. In monarchy, the King is exalted so high above his subjects, that his ministers are little better than servants. Such condition is not friendly to patriotism: it is as little friendly to ambition; for ministers are still servants, however much raised above other subjects. Wealth being the only remaining pursuit, promotes avarice to be their ruling passion. Now if patriotism be not found in ministers, who have power, far less in men who have no power; and thus in monarchy, riches are preferred before virtue, and every vicious offspring of avarice has free course.

Without piercing to the foundation, one can have no just notion of the various forms that government assumes in different states. Monarchy is of many different kinds, and so is a repu-

the great council appropriates to its own members, occasions a constant influx of riches into the capital. Patriotism is observed of late years to be on the decline among the citizens of Bern; and no wonder, considering that luxury and selfishness are the never-failing offspring of opulence. When selfishness becomes the ruling passion of that people, those in power will pilfer the public treasure, which is immense, and enrich themselves with the spoils of the republic. Confusion and anarchy must ensue, and the state will settle in a monarchy, or more probably in an odious democracy.



blic. Rome and Carthage, the two great rival republics of ancient times, differed widely in their original constitution. Much has been said of these republics by historians and political writers. There is one point of comparison, that will set in a clear light the difference of their constitutions, with respect to peace and war. Carthage, advantageously situated for commerce, became a great and flourishing trading town. The Carthaginians having no object but riches, admitted none into a participation of their privileges. War was against their genius: but conquest was not, if it produced wealth; and therefore they made war in order to load their new subjects with taxes. Rome, on the contrary, was ill situated for commerce: its inhabitants were from the beginning employed in war, either defensive or offensive. Their great object accordingly was power; to which end, they were always disposed to adopt as citizens the best of those they conquered. Thus Rome became a city of warriors, Carthage of merchants. The subjects of the latter were always ripe for a revolt, while the subjects of the former were always faithful. Between two such states, there could be no equality in war; and had the Carthaginians been as skilful in politics as they were in commerce, they would have avoided, with the strictest circumspection, every occasion of quarrel with the Romans. Rome employ'd its own citizens in war: Carthage had none to employ but mercenaries. In an offensive war, the object of the latter was riches; that of the former was power and glory, motives much superior, and more animating. In a defensive war, the difference is infinite between mercenaries, who have no interest but to receive their pay, and citizens, who fight for their country, and for their wives and children. What then are we to think of Hannibal, who, reversing the laws of nature, carried on war against the Romans with an army of mercenaries, was successful in every engagement, and brought them to the very brink of ruin? He certainly was the greatest

greatest General the world ever saw. If any one is to be excepted, it is the present King of Prussia.

I next compare different forms of government, with respect to the influence of opulence. Riches, which, joined with ambition, produce bold attempts for power, are however not dangerous in monarchy, where the sovereign is so far superior, as to humble to the dust the most aspiring of his subjects. But riches, joined with ambition, are dangerous in a republic: ambition will suggest the possibility of sowing dissension among the leaders; riches will make the attempt successful; and then adieu to the republic. Wealth, accumulated by commerce in Carthage and in Athens, extinguished patriotism, and rendered their democracy unjust, violent, and tyrannical. It had another bad effect; which was, to make them ambitious of conquest. The sage Plutarch charges Themistocles with the ruin of Athens. "That great man," says he, "inspired his countrymen with desire of naval power. That power produced extensive commerce, and consequently riches: riches again, beside luxury, inspired the Athenians with a high opinion of their power, and made them rashly engage in every quarrel among their neighbours." Suppress the names, and one will believe it to be a censure on the conduct of Britain. Successful commerce prompted the Carthaginians, against their natural interest, to make war for gain. Had they been successful against the Romans, both nations would have fallen a sacrifice to the ambition of Hannibal: after subduing Italy, what Carthaginian durst have opposed that glorious conqueror, returning with a victorious army, devoted to his will? That event was long dreaded by Hanno, and the wiser part of the Carthaginian senate; and hence their scanty supplies to Hannibal. But what is only a supposition with respect to Carthage, proved to be the fate of Rome. Inequality of rank, opulence, and luxury, relaxed every fundamental principle of the commonwealth, particularly rotation
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of power, which ought to have been their palladium. Conquest at a distance, led them unwarily, in some instances, to suspend that fundamental law; of which Cæsar availed himself in his Gallic war, by debauching from their duty the best disciplined army of the republic: and it was that army, under a leader little inferior to Hannibal, which determined the fate of Rome.

A state with a small territory, such as Hamburgh or Holland, may subsist long as a commonwealth, without much hazard from the opulence of individuals. But an extensive territory in the hands of a few opulent proprietors, is dangerous in a commonwealth; because of their influence over numbers who depend on them for bread. The island of Britain is too large for a commonwealth. This occurred to a profound political writer (*a*) who does honour to his country; and to remedy the evil, he proposes an Agrarian law. But it is vain to think, that accumulation of land can be prevented by an Agrarian law: a trust-deed is a ready screen for covering accumulation beyond law: and dark transactions will be carried on without end; similar to what is practised, most dishonestly, by those who elect and are elected members of parliament. When such comes to be the condition of land-property, the Agrarian law will be ripe for dissolution.

In early times, we discover greater variety of character than at present; among sovereigns especially, who are not taught to govern their passions. Perusing the history of Spain in particular, one is struck with an amazing variety of character in the Moorish Kings. In some of them, outrageous cruelty; in others, mildness, and affection for their people: in some, unbounded ambition, surmounting every obstacle of justice and humanity; in others, strict attention to commerce and to every moral virtue; some heaping up treasure; some squandering all upon voluptuousness;

(*a*) Harrington.



some cultivating peace; some fond of war. During the nonage of society, men exert their natural bias without reserve; in the progress of society, they are taught to moderate their turbulent passions: at last mild and courtly behaviour, produced by education and imitation, give an air to men of figure as if they were all copies from one original; which is peculiarly the case in France. The mildness of external behaviour, must have a considerable influence on the internal part; for nothing tends more to soften or to suppress a passion, than never to give it vent; and for that reason, absolute monarchy in France is far from being so dreadful as it was formerly. It is at present far from being violent or sanguinary; the manners of the people having the same influence there, that laws have in a free country. The King, delicate with respect to his conduct, and dreading the censure of the world, is guilty of few excesses; and the people, tame and submissive, are easily kept in order. Among men of rank, to be discharged the court, or to be relegated to their country-seats, is more terrible than a capital punishment.

We finish this short essay with a comparison of different governments as to the execution of laws. Laws relative to property and pecuniary interest, are every where preserved in vigour, because the violation of them hurts many. Laws respecting the public, are kept alive in monarchical governments; because the King, to whom execution of law is intrusted, seldom benefits by their transgression. For a steady execution of such laws, a democracy has nothing to rely on but patriotism; and when that subsides, such laws fall asleep. The reason is, that the powers both of legislation and execution center in the people; and a multitude, frequently no better than a mob, will never with constancy direct execution against themselves.

S K E T C H

