

**Landesbibliothek Oldenburg**

**Digitalisierung von Drucken**

**An Essay On The History Of Civil Society**

**Ferguson, Adam**

**London, 1767**

Sect. I Of Corruption in general.

**urn:nbn:de:gbv:45:1-1517**

## P A R T   S I X T H .

## Of Corruption and Political Slavery.

## S E C T. I.

*Of Corruption in general.*

**I**F the fortune of nations, and their tendency to aggrandisement, or to ruin, were to be estimated by merely balancing, on the principles of last section, articles of profit and loss, every argument in politics would rest on a comparison of national expence with national gain; on a comparison of the numbers who consume, with those who produce or amass the necessaries of life. The columns of the industrious, and the idle, would include all orders of men; and the state itself, being allowed as many magistrates, politicians, and warriors, as were barely sufficient for its defence and its government,

vernment, should place, on the side of its loss, every name that is supernumerary on the civil or the military list; all those orders of men, who, by the possession of fortune, subsist on the gains of others, and by the nicety of their choice, require a great expence of time and of labour, to supply their consumption; all those who are idly employed in the train of persons of rank; all those who are engaged in the professions of law, physic, or divinity, together with all the learned, who do not, by their studies, promote or improve the practice of some lucrative trade. The value of every person, in short, should be computed from his labour; and that of labour itself, from its tendency to procure and amass the means of subsistence. The arts employed on mere superfluities should be prohibited, except when their produce could be exchanged with foreign nations, for commodities that might be employed to maintain useful men for the public.

THESE appear to be the rules by which a miser would examine the state of his own affairs, or those of his country; but schemes of perfect corruption are at least as impracticable as schemes of perfect virtue. Men are not universally misers; they will not be satisfied with the pleasure of hoarding; they must be suffered to enjoy their wealth, in order that they may take the trouble of becoming rich. Property, in the common course of human affairs, is unequally divided: we are therefore obliged to suffer the wealthy to squander, that the poor may subsist; we are obliged to tolerate certain orders of



men, who are above the necessity of labour, in order that, in their condition, there may be an object of ambition, and a rank to which the busy aspire. We are not only obliged to admit numbers, who, in strict economy, may be reckoned superfluous, on the civil, the military, and the political list; but because we are men, and prefer the occupation, improvement, and felicity of our nature, to its mere existence, we must even wish, that as many members as possible, of every community, may be admitted to a share of its defence and its government.

MEN, in fact, while they pursue in society different objects, or separate views, procure a wide distribution of power, and by a species of chance, arrive at a posture for civil engagements, more favourable to human nature than what human wisdom could ever calmly devise.

IF the strength of a nation, in the mean time, consists in the men on whom it may rely, and who are fortunately or wisely combined for its preservation, it follows, that manners are as important as either numbers or wealth; and that corruption is to be accounted a principal cause of national declension and ruin.

WHOEVER perceives what are the qualities of man in his excellence, may easily, by that standard, distinguish his defects or corruptions. If an intelligent, a courageous, and an affectionate mind, constitutes the perfection of his nature, remarkable failings in any of those

those particulars, must proportionally sink or debase his character.

WE have observed, that it is the happiness of the individual to make a right choice of his conduct; that this choice will lead him to lose in society the sense of a personal interest; and, in the consideration of what is due to the whole, to stifle those anxieties which relate to himself as a part.

THE natural disposition of man to humanity, and the warmth of his temper, may raise his character to this fortunate pitch. His elevation, in a great measure, depends on the form of his society; but he can, without incurring the charge of corruption, accommodate himself to great variations in the constitutions of government. The same integrity, and vigorous spirit, which, in democratical states, renders him tenacious of his equality, may, under aristocracy or monarchy, lead him to maintain the subordinations established. He may entertain, towards the different ranks of men with whom he is yoked in the state, maxims of respect and of candour: he may, in the choice of his actions, follow a principle of justice, and of honour, which the considerations of safety, preferment, or profit, cannot efface.

FROM our complaints of national depravity, it should, notwithstanding, appear, that whole bodies of men are sometimes infected with an epidemical weakness of the head, or corruption of heart, by which they become  
unfit

unfit for the stations they occupy, and threaten the states they compose, however flourishing, with a prospect of decay, and of ruin.

A change of national manners for the worse, may arise from a discontinuance of the scenes in which the talents of men were happily cultivated, and brought into exercise; or from a change in the prevailing opinions relating to the constituents of honour or of happiness. When mere riches, or court-favour, are supposed to constitute rank; the mind is misled from the consideration of qualities on which it ought to rely. Magnanimity, courage, and the love of mankind, are sacrificed to avarice and vanity, or suppressed under a sense of dependence. The individual considers his community so far only as it can be rendered subservient to his personal advancement or profit: he states himself in competition with his fellow-creatures; and, urged by the passions of emulation, of fear and jealousy, of envy and malice, he follows the maxims of an animal destined to preserve his separate existence, and to indulge his caprice or his appetite, at the expence of his species.

ON this corrupt foundation, men become either rapacious, deceitful, and violent, ready to trespass on the rights of others; or servile, mercenary, and base, prepared to relinquish their own. Talents, capacity, and force of mind, possessed by a person of the first description, serve to plunge him the deeper in misery, and to sharpen the agony of cruel passions; which lead him to  
wreak

wreak on his fellow-creatures the torments that prey on himself. To a person of the second, imagination, and reason itself, only serve to point out false objects of fear, or desire, and to multiply the subjects of disappointment, and of momentary joy. In either case, and whether we suppose that corrupt men are urged by covetousness, or betrayed by fear, and without specifying the crimes which from either disposition they are prepared to commit, we may safely affirm, with Socrates, "That every master should pray he may not meet with such a slave; and every such person, being unfit for liberty, should implore that he may meet with a merciful master."

MAN, under this measure of corruption, although he may be bought for a slave by those who know how to turn his faculties and his labour to profit; and although, when kept under proper restraints, his neighbourhood may be convenient or useful; yet is certainly unfit to act on the footing of a liberal combination or concert with his fellow-creatures: his mind is not addicted to friendship or confidence; he is not willing to act for the preservation of others, nor deserves that any other should hazard his own safety for his.

THE actual character of mankind, mean-time, in the worst, as well as the best condition, is undoubtedly mixed: and nations of the best description are greatly obliged for their preservation, not only to the good disposition of their members, but likewise to those political institutions,



institutions, by which the violent are restrained from the commission of crimes, and the cowardly, or the selfish, are made to contribute their part to the public defence or prosperity. By means of such institutions, and the wise precautions of government, nations are enabled to subsist, and even to prosper, under very different degrees of corruption, or of public integrity.

So long as the majority of a people is supposed to act on maxims of probity, the example of the good, and even the caution of the bad, give a general appearance of integrity, and of innocence. Where men are to one another objects of affection and of confidence, where they are generally disposed not to offend, government may be remiss; and every person may be treated as innocent, till he is found to be guilty. As the subject in this case does not hear of the crimes, so he need not be told of the punishments inflicted on persons of a different character. But where the manners of a people are considerably changed for the worse, every subject must stand on his guard, and government itself must act on suitable maxims of fear and distrust. The individual, no longer fit to be indulged in his pretensions to personal consideration, independence, or freedom, each of which he would turn to abuse, must be taught, by external force, and from motives of fear, to counterfeit those effects of innocence, and of duty, to which he is not disposed: he must be referred to the whip, or the gibbet, for arguments in support of a caution, which the state now requires him to assume, on a supposition that he is inflexible



sible to the motives which recommend the practice of virtue.

THE rules of despotism are made for the government of corrupted men. They were indeed followed on some remarkable occasions, even under the Roman commonwealth; and the bloody axe, to terrify the citizen from his crimes, and to repel the casual and temporary irruptions of vice, was repeatedly committed to the arbitrary will of the dictator. They were finally established on the ruins of the republic itself, when either the people became too corrupted for freedom, or when the magistrate became too corrupted to resign his dictatorial power. This species of government comes naturally in the termination of a continued and growing corruption; but has no doubt, in some instances, come too soon, and has sacrificed remains of virtue, that deserved a better fate, to the jealousy of tyrants, who were in haste to augment their power. This method of government cannot, in such cases, fail to introduce that measure of corruption, against whose external effects it is desired as a remedy. When fear is suggested as the only motive to duty, every heart becomes rapacious or base. And this medicine, if applied to a healthy body, is sure to create the distemper it is destined to cure.

THIS is the manner of government into which the covetous, and the arrogant, to satiate their unhappy desires, would hurry their fellow-creatures: it is a manner of government to which the timorous and the fer-



vile submit at discretion; and when these characters of the rapacious and the timid divide mankind, even the virtues of Antoninus or Trajan, can do no more than apply, with candour and with vigour, the whip and the sword; and endeavour, by the hopes of reward, or the fear of punishment, to find a speedy and a temporary cure for the crimes, or the imbecilities of men.

OTHER states may be more or less corrupted: this has corruption for its basis. Here justice may sometimes direct the arm of the despotic sovereign; but the name of justice is most commonly employed to signify the interest, or the caprice, of a reigning power. Human society, susceptible of such a variety of forms, here finds the simplest of all. The toils and possessions of many are destined to assuage the passions of one or a few; and the only parties that remain among mankind, are the oppressor who demands, and the oppressed who dare not refuse.

NATIONS, while they were intitled to a milder fate, as in the case of the Greeks, repeatedly conquered, have been reduced to this condition by military force. They have reached it too in the maturity of their own deprivations; when, like the Romans, returned from the conquest, and loaded with the spoils, of the world, they gave loose to faction, and to crimes too bold and too frequent for the correction of ordinary government; and when the sword of justice, dropping with blood, and perpetually required to suppress accumulating disorders



orders on every side, could no longer await the delays and precautions of an administration fettered by laws.

IT is, however, well known from the history of mankind, that corruption of this, or of any other degree, is not peculiar to nations in their decline, or in the result of signal prosperity, and great advances in the arts of commerce. The bands of society, indeed, in small and infant establishments, are generally strong; and their subjects, either by an ardent devotion to their own tribe, or a vehement animosity against enemies, and by a vigorous courage founded on both, are well qualified to urge, or to sustain, the fortune of a growing community. But the savage, and the barbarian, have given, notwithstanding, in the case of entire nations, some examples of a weak and timorous character\*. They have, in more instances, fallen into that species of corruption which we have already described in treating of barbarous nations; they have made rapine their trade, not merely as a species of warfare, or with a view to enrich their community, but to possess, in property, what they learned to prefer even to the ties of affection or of blood.

IN the lowest state of commercial arts, the passions for wealth, and for dominion, have exhibited scenes of oppression, or servility, which the most finished corrup-

\* The barbarous nations of Siberia, in general, are servile and timid.



tion of the arrogant, the cowardly, and the mercenary, founded on the desire of procuring, or the fear of losing, a fortune, could not exceed. In such cases, the vices of men, unrestrained by forms, and unawed by police, are suffered to riot at large, and to produce their entire effects. Parties accordingly unite, or separate, on the maxims of a gang of robbers; they sacrifice to interest the tenderest affections of human nature. The parent supplies the market for slaves, even by the sale of his own children; the cottage ceases to be a sanctuary for the weak and the defenceless stranger; and rites of hospitality, often so sacred among nations in their primitive state, come to be violated, like every other tie of humanity, without fear or remorse\*.

NATIONS, which in later periods of their history became eminent for civil wisdom and justice, had, perhaps, in a former age, paroxysms of lawless disorder, to which this description might in part be applied. The very policy by which they arrived at their degree of national felicity, was devised as a remedy for outrageous abuse. The establishment of order was dated from the commission of rapes and murders; indignation, and private revenge, were the principles on which nations proceeded to the expulsion of tyrants, to the emancipation of mankind, and the full explanation of their political rights.

\* Chardin's travels through Mingrelia into Persia.



DEFECTS of government, and of law, may be in some cases considered as a symptom of innocence and of virtue. But where power is already established, where the strong are unwilling to suffer restraint, or the weak unable to find a protection, the defects of law are marks of the most perfect corruption.

AMONG rude nations, government is often defective; both because men are not yet acquainted with all the evils for which polished nations have endeavoured to find a redress; and because, even where evils of the most flagrant nature have long afflicted the peace of society, they have not yet been able to apply the cure. In the progress of civilization, new distempers break forth, and new remedies are applied: but the remedy is not always applied the moment the distemper appears; and laws, though suggested by the commission of crimes, are not the symptom of a recent corruption, but of a desire to find a remedy that may cure, perhaps, some inveterate evil which has long afflicted the state.

THERE are corruptions, however, under which men still possess the vigour and the resolution to correct themselves. Such are the violence and the outrage which accompany the collision of fierce and daring spirits, occupied in the struggles which sometimes precede the dawn of civil and commercial improvements. In such cases, men have frequently discovered a remedy for evils, of which their own misguided impetuosity, and  
superior

superior force of mind, were the principal causes. But if to a depraved disposition, we suppose to be joined a weakness of spirit; if to an admiration, and desire of riches, be joined an aversion to danger or business; if those orders of men whose valour is required by the public, cease to be brave; if the members of society, in general, have not those personal qualities which are required to fill the stations of equality, or of honour, to which they are invited by the forms of the state; they must sink to a depth from which their imbecility, even more than their depraved inclinations, may prevent their rise.

S E C T.

