

THE INSTITUTE FOR ANACYCLOSIS

EXCERPT FROM
THE SPIRIT OF THE LAWS
BY MONTESQUIEU

1748 A.D.

Note: This text contains a classic view on the corruption of democracy and its ultimate transition into monarchy. Footnotes have been omitted.

Book 8. On the corruption of the principles of the three governments. Chapter 2. On the corruption of the principle of democracy.

The principle of democracy is corrupted not only when the spirit of equality is lost but also when the spirit of extreme equality is taken up and each one wants to be equal to those chosen to command. So the people, finding intolerable even the power they entrust to the others, want to do everything themselves: to deliberate for the senate, to execute for the magistrates, and to cast aside all the judges.

... One sees in Xenophon's *Symposium* an artless depiction of a republic whose people have abused equality. Each guest in turn gives his reason for being pleased with himself. "I am pleased with myself," says Charmides, "because of my poverty. When I was rich I was obliged to pay court to slanderers, well aware that I was more likely to receive ill from them than to cause them any; the republic constantly asked for a new payment; I could not travel. Since becoming poor, I have acquired authority; no one threatens me, I threaten the others; I can go or stay. The rich now rise from their seats and make way for me. Now I am a king, I was a slave; I used to pay a tax to the republic, today the republic feeds me; I no longer fear loss, I expect to acquire."

The people fall into this misfortune when those to whom they entrust themselves, wanting to hide their own corruption, seek to corrupt the people. To keep the people from seeing their own ambition, they speak only of the people's greatness; to keep the people from perceiving their avarice, they constantly encourage that of the people.

Corruption will increase among those who corrupt, and it will increase among those who are already corrupted. The people will distribute among themselves all the public funds; and, just as they will join the management of business to their laziness, they will want to join the amusements of luxury to their poverty. But given their laziness and their luxury, only the public treasure can be their object.

One must not be astonished to see votes given for silver. One cannot give the people much without taking even more from them; but, in order to take from them, the state must be overthrown. The more the people appear to take advantage of their liberty, the nearer they approach the moment they are to lose it. Petty tyrants are formed, having all the vices of a single one. What remains of liberty soon becomes intolerable. A single tyrant rises up, and the people lose everything, even the advantages of their corruption.

Therefore, democracy has to avoid two excesses: the spirit of inequality, which leads it to aristocracy or to the government of one alone, and the spirit of extreme equality, which leads it to the despotism of one alone, as the despotism of one alone ends by conquest....

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