Forms of government

Government

Montesquieu holds that there are three types of governments: republican governments, which can take either democratic or aristocratic forms; monarchies; and despotisms. Unlike, for instance, Aristotle, Montesquieu does not distinguish forms of government on the basis of the virtue of the sovereign. The distinction between monarchy and despotism, for instance, depends not on the virtue of the monarch, but on whether or not he governs " by fixed and established laws" (SL 2. 1).

Each form of government has a principle, a set of " human passions which set it in motion" (SL 3. 1); and each can be corrupted if its principle is undermined or destroyed. In a democracy, the people are sovereign. They may govern through ministers, or be advised by a senate, but they must have the power of choosing their ministers and senators for themselves. The principle of democracy is political virtue, by which Montesquieu means " the love of the laws and of our country" (SL 4. 5), including its democratic constitution.

The form of a democratic government makes the laws governing suffrage and voting fundamental. The need to protect its principle, however, imposes far more extensive requirements. On Montesquieu's view, the virtue required by a functioning democracy is not natural. It requires " a constant preference of public to private interest" (SL 4. 5); it " limits ambition to the sole desire, to the solehappiness, of doing greater services to our country than the rest of our fellow citizens" (SL 5.); and it " is a self-renunciation, which is ever arduous and painful" (SL 4. 5). Montesquieu compares it to monks' love for their order: " their rule debars them from all those things by which the ordinary passions are fed; there remains therefore only this passion for the

very rule that torments them. ... the more it curbs their inclinations, the more force it gives to the only passion left them" (SL 5. 2). To produce this unnatural self-renunciation, " the whole power ofeducationis required" (SL 4.).

A democracy must educate its citizens to identify their interests with the interests of their country, and should have censors to preserve its mores. It should seek to establish frugality by law, so as to prevent its citizens from being tempted to advance their own private interests at the expense of the public good; for the same reason, the laws by which property is transferred should aim to preserve an equal distribution of property among citizens. Its territory should be small, so hat it is easy for citizens to identify with it, and more difficult for extensive private interests to emerge. Democracies can be corrupted in two ways: by what Montesquieu calls " the spirit of inequality" and " the spirit of extremeequality" (SL 8. 2). The spirit of inequality arises when citizens no longer identify their interests with the interests of their country, and therefore seek both to advance their own private interests at the expense of their fellow citizens, and to acquire political power over them.

The spirit of extreme equality arises when the people are no longer content to be equal as citizens, but want to be equal in everyrespect. In a functioning democracy, the people choose magistrates to exercise executive power, and they respect and obey the magistrates they have chosen. If those magistrates forfeit their respect, they replace them. When the spirit of extreme equality takes root, however, the citizens neither respect nor obey any magistrate. They " want to manage everything themselves, to debate for the senate, to execute for the magistrate, and to decide for the judges" (SL

8.). Eventually the government will cease to function, the last remnants of virtue will disappear, and democracy will be replaced by despotism. In an aristocracy, one part of the people governs the rest. The principle of an aristocratic government is moderation, the virtue which leads those who govern in an aristocracy to restrain themselves both from oppressing the people and from trying to acquire excessive power over one another. In an aristocracy, the laws should be designed to instill and protect this spirit of moderation.

To do so, they must do three things. First, the laws must prevent the nobility from abusing the people. The power of the nobility makes such abuse a standing temptation in an aristocracy; to avoid it, the laws should deny the nobility some powers, like the power to tax, which would make this temptation all but irresistible, and should try to foster responsible and moderate administration. Second, the laws should disguise as much as possible the difference between the nobility and the people, so that the people feel their lack of power as little as possible.

Thus the nobility should have modest and simple manners, since if they do not attempt to distinguish themselves from the people " the people are apt to forget their subjection and weakness" (SL 5. 8). Finally, the laws should try to ensure equality among the nobles themselves, and among noble families. When they fail to do so, the nobility will lose its spirit of moderation, and the government will be corrupted. In a monarchy, one person governs " by fixed and established laws" (SL 2. 1).

According to Montesquieu, these laws " necessarily suppose the intermediate channels through which (the monarch's) power flows: for if there be only the momentary and capricious will of a single person to govern the state, nothing can be fixed, and, of course, there is no fundamental law" (SL 2. 4). These 'intermediate channels' are such subordinate institutions as the nobility and an independent judiciary; and the laws of a monarchy should therefore be designed to preserve their power. The principle of monarchical government is honor.

Unlike the virtue required by republican governments, the desire to win honor and distinction comes naturally to us. For this reason education has a less difficult task in a monarchy than in a republic: it need only heighten our ambitions and our sense of our own worth, provide us with an ideal of honor worth aspiring to, and cultivate in us the politeness needed to live with others whose sense of their worth matches our own. The chief task of the laws in a monarchy is to protect the subordinate institutions that distinguish monarchy from despotism.

To this end, they should make it easy to preserve large estates undivided, protect the rights and privileges of the nobility, and promote the rule of law. They should also encourage the proliferation of distinctions and of rewards for honorable conduct, including luxuries. A monarchy is corrupted when the monarch either destroys the subordinate institutions that constrain his will, or decides to rule arbitrarily, without regard to the basic laws of his country, or debases the honors at which his citizens might aim, so that " men are capable of being loaded at the very same time with infamy and with dignities" (SL 8.). The first two forms of corruption destroy the checks on the

sovereign's will that separate monarchy from despotism; the third severs the connection between honorable conduct and its proper rewards. In a functioning monarchy, personal ambition and a sense of honor work together. This is monarchy's great strength and the source of its extraordinary stability: whether its citizens act from genuine virtue, a sense of their own worth, a desire to serve their king, or personal ambition, they will be led to act in ways that serve their country.

A monarch who rules arbitrarily, or who rewards servility and ignoble conduct instead of genuine honor, severs this connection and corrupts his government. In despotic states " a single person directs everything by his own will and caprice" (SL 2. 1). Without laws to check him, and with no need to attend to anyone who does not agree with him, a despot can do whatever he likes, however ill-advised or reprehensible. His subjects are no better than slaves, and he can dispose of them as he sees fit.

The principle of despotism is fear. This fear is easily maintained, since the situation of a despot's subjects is genuinely terrifying. Education is unnecessary in a despotism; if it exists at all, it should be designed to debase the mind and break the spirit. Such ideas as honor and virtue should not occur to a despot's subjects, since " persons capable of setting a value on themselves would be likely to create disturbances. Fear must therefore depress their spirits, and extinguish even the least sense of ambition" (SL 3.). Their " portion here, like that of beasts, is instinct, compliance, and punishment" (SL 3. 10), and any higher aspirations should be brutally discouraged. Montesquieu writes that " the principle of despotic government is subject to a continual corruption, because it is even in its nature corrupt"

(SL 8. 10). This is true in several senses. First, despotic governments undermine themselves. Because property is not secure in a despotic state, commerce will not flourish, and the state will be poor.

The people must be kept in a state of fear by the threat of punishment; however, over time the punishments needed to keep them in line will tend to become more and more severe, until further threats lose their force. Most importantly, however, the despot's character is likely to prevent him from ruling effectively. Since a despot's every whim is granted, he " has no occasion to deliberate, to doubt, to reason; he has only to will" (SL 4. 3).

For this reason he is never forced to develop anything like intelligence, character, or resolution. Instead, he is " naturally lazy, voluptuous, and ignorant" (SL 2. 5), and has no interest in actually governing his people. He will therefore choose a vizier to govern for him, and retire to his seraglio to pursue pleasure. In his absence, however, intrigues against him will multiply, especially since his rule is necessarily odious to his subjects, and since they have so little to lose if their plots against him fail.

He cannot rely on his army to protect him, since the more power they have, the greater the likelihood that his generals will themselves try to seize power. For this reason the ruler in a despotic state has no more security than his people. Second, monarchical and republican governments involve specific governmental structures, and require that their citizens have specific sorts ofmotivation. When these structures crumble, or these motivations fail, monarchical and republican governments are corrupted, and the result of their corruption is that they fall into despotism.

But when a particular despotic government falls, it is not generally replaced by a monarchy or a republic. The creation of a stable monarchy or republic is extremely difficult: " a masterpiece of legislation, rarely produced by hazard, and seldom attained by prudence" (SL 5. 14). It is particularly difficult when those who would have both to frame the laws of such a government and to live by them have previously been brutalized and degraded by despotism. Producing a despotic government, by contrast, is relatively straightforward.

A despotism requires no powers to be carefully balanced against one another, no institutions to be created and maintained in existence, no complicated motivations to be fostered, and no restraints on power to be kept in place. One need only terrify one's fellow citizens enough to allow one to impose one's will on them; and this, Montesquieu claims, " is what every capacity may reach" (SL 5. 14). For these reasons despotism necessarily stands in a different relation to corruption than other forms of government: while they are liable to corruption, despotism is its embodiment.