

# French essays - egalitarian political regimes



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## **Explain and Discuss the Fragility of Egalitarian Political Regimes, as Represented in BOTH the Lettres Persanes AND the Contrat Social.**

Though *The Spirit of Laws* is probably the best-known work of Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, his *Lettres Persanes* (Persian Letters) is another famous work in which he explores, with perhaps more depth, the notion of equality and egalitarian political rule. A generation later, John Jacques Rousseau would appear on the political landscape and present his own ideas on the same topic. Chief to be explored among his writings will be the *Contrat Social* (Social Contract) in which Rousseau lays out with some detail a discussion of the nature of egalitarian political regimes and explores various strengths and weaknesses of them.

### Montesquieu and the Fragility of Egalitarianism

In the beginning of the 89th letter, Montesquieu claims that “ A Paris règnent la liberté et l'égalité.” Birthrights, social ranks, and even military victories did not set men apart (in terms of class distinctions) in Paris during his writing. This was a thing to be praised by Montesquieu. He saw too much in the world that lent itself away from egalitarianism, at least insofar as the right of persons to be equal is concerned. It will be beneficial here to take a moment to set up Montesquieu's views on the republic to better lay a foundation for his comments on equality. In Book 11 of the *Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu explores the (then) unique situation in England of a monarchy controlled, to an extent, by a constitution, and it that portion of the *Spirit of the Laws* Montesquieu is chiefly impressed by and concerned with the Englishman's “ liberty.” As regards the very nature of a republic, Montesquieu argues in the <https://assignbuster.com/french-essays-egalitarian-political-regimes/>

Spirit of the Laws that there are three basic types of governmental systems. The despot rules by inculcating fear in the people. The monarch does better and rules by a sense of honor and by “ fixed established laws.” Both of these types of governing are fairly stable. One does not need to necessarily think of them as intrinsically fragile in the sense in which, say, the last political option (i. e., the republic) may be thought to be fragile. The despot, so long as he maintains fear amongst the peoples, has nothing to fear himself.

Apparently for Montesquieu, it is the monarchy which is the first and primary type of government. He writes in Letter 131 of the *Lettres Persanes*, “ Les premiers gouvernements du monde furent monarchiques.” Coming on the heels of this original type of government would be both the despotic rule and the republic, the latter of which comes by “ chance,” he indicates.

Apparently, despotism amounts to little more than a degeneration of an original monarchy. But, the republic is a genuine advancement of the Greeks. However, this advancement brings with it an intrinsic tendency toward reversion to that which preceded it, either monarchy or despotism, and this fact may be due to the complexity of the republic in both its nature and principles.

For Montesquieu, one of the things that may typify the fragile nature of the republic is that it “ cannot survive without what Montesquieu calls political virtue.” It is this requirement that the citizens must embody this political virtue (without which the republic could not endure) that lends to the fragile nature of republics. If the people cease persisting in this virtue, the republic could not endure, for the republic exists and continues only so long as the habits and eventual character of political virtue are exemplified in the

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people. In the republic, there is no one-to-one correspondence with what exists in despotism or a monarchy: a strong central authority. Therefore, the people must, by loving egalitarianism and the laws, arrange a situation for themselves wherein the needs of the good are served, even if at the expense of the needs of the many. This is exactly what Greece did, he argues, and it is incumbent upon any subsequent attempts at a republic to do the same. “ L’amour de la liberté, la haine des rois, conserva longtemps la Grèce dans l’indépendance, et étendit au loin le gouvernement républicain.”

### Rousseau and the Fragility of Egalitarianism

One could hardly resist beginning the discussion on Rousseau with his famous opening to chapter one of the *Contrat Social*. “ L’homme est né libre, et partout il est dans les fers.” How this particular situation came to be, Rousseau does not attempt to answer. Rather, he focuses his attention on how it is that man can get back to his original (or perhaps “ primal”) state of freedom. If man in a state of servitude obeys his masters, he does well. However, if he can break free from that state, he does better still because to be free is man’s natural and original state, seen most evidently within the rites of passage intrinsic to family life.

Although it could not be rightly said that Rousseau takes no points of departure from the thought of Montesquieu, there are nevertheless significant points of agreement between them on the idea of the republic. Rousseau offers as his main contribution to the discussion over the republic that a return to the ancient (i. e., Greek) *polis* is the most advisable course of action. Yet, an intrinsic tension to this suggestion is that Rousseau

simultaneously advocates the idea of the “ natural law” quite strongly.

According to Helena Rosenblatt, for Rousseau the natural law is a very self-interested concept, which is at least *prima facie* at odds with the republican ideal of each person being grounded in virtue and community as that which adheres the republic together and maintains it. The more refined concept of the “ general will” complicates the matter further and makes egalitarianism a la republicanism an even more fragile thing.

### Rousseau’s “ General Will”

In his writings prior to the Social Contract, Rousseau had explicitly indicated that he denied that man was naturally and easily a sociable creature. No, man’s first inclinations are not toward the public good, but in the direction of particular self-interests and this is evident by the historical facts that “ les longs débats, les dissensions, le tumulte, annoncent l’ascendant des intérêts particuliers et le déclin de l’Etat.” So, what takes place amidst the social contract is the necessity of all citizens when laying down public policy to *not* act in merely self-interested ways. The good of the many, the common good, was to be the overriding concern of all citizens in this regard, and this is the “ general will” of Rousseau, which he explores and elaborates in great throughout the Social Contract. But, what makes this concept of the “ general will” even more tense and lending to the creation of a fragile situation for egalitarianism is the paradoxical idea related to literally enforcing that citizens act in accord with the general will.

The general will is not merely reducible to the “ will of all people combined.” No, it is the “ right” will which ever seeks the good of the whole State and

never acts in a merely self-interested way. It is basically the will of God then, which must ever be right and, since God is omnibenevolent and always has the interests of everyone in mind, this is in line with the general will as Rousseau explicates it here. He writes, “ Afin donc que le pacte social ne soit pas un vain formulaire, il renferme tacitement cet engagement qui seul peut donner de la force aux autres, que quiconque refusera d’obéir à la volonté générale y sera contraint par tout le corps: ce qui ne signifie autre chose sinon qu’on le forcera d’être libre.” This is the key to the whole enterprise. It prevents the social contract from becoming, as he says, “ un vain formulaire” (an empty formula). But, of course, although such an aspect of the overall contract is certainly sensible, how it is appropriated lends itself to fragility. The line is not always so clear when one is acting merely in his own self-interest and when he is acting in respect to the common good (or both simultaneously, which would apparently not violate the general will). It is not necessarily contradictory in its premise, but it is certainly paradoxical, as Rousseau surely felt.

## Conclusion

Both Montesquieu and Rousseau in their respective days were vastly aware with the attending problems associated with the reintroduction of the ancient ideas of the republic and egalitarianism. However, they each firmly believed that whatever problems may accompany the advent of such in Modernity, it would certainly be worth it. For both of them, as most Westerners today would greatly sympathize, any form of egalitarianism via a republic, whatever fragility may accompany it, would be greatly preferable to either a monarchy or (especially) a despotic State.

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