

AN ENQUIRY CONCERNING POLITICAL JUSTICE

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CHAPTER II / HISTORY OF POLITICAL SOCIETY

Frequency of war -- Among the ancients -- Among the moderns -- The French -- The English. -- Causes of war. -- Penal laws. -- Despotism. -- Deduction. -- Enumeration of arguments.

{5} While we enquire whether government is capable of improvement, we shall do well to consider its present effects. It is an old observation, that the history of mankind is little else than the history of crimes. War has hitherto been considered as the inseparable ally of political institution. The earliest records of time are the annals of conquerors and heroes, a Bacchus, a Sesostris, a Semiramis and a Cyrus. These princes led millions of men under their standard, and ravaged innumerable provinces. A small number only of their forces ever returned to their native homes, the rest having perished of diseases, hardships and misery. The evils they inflicted, and the mortality introduced in the countries against which their expeditions were directed, were certainly not less severe than those which their countrymen suffered. No sooner does history become more precise, than we are presented with the four great monarchies, that is, with four successful projects, by means of {6} bloodshed, violence and murder, of enslaving mankind. The expeditions of Cambyses against Egypt, of Darius against the Scythians, and of Xerxes against the Greeks, seem almost to set credibility at defiance by the fatal consequences with which they were attended. The conquests of Alexander cost innumerable lives, and the immortality of Cæsar is computed to have been purchased by the death of one million two hundred thousand men. Indeed the Romans, by the long duration of their wars, and their inflexible adherence to their purpose, are to be ranked among the foremost destroyers of the human species. Their wars in Italy endured for more than four hundred years, and their contest for supremacy with the Carthaginians two hundred. The Mithridatic war began with a massacre of one hundred and fifty thousand Romans, and in three single actions of the war five hundred thousand men were lost by the eastern monarch. Sylla, his ferocious conqueror, next turned his arms against his country, and the struggle between him and Marius was attended with proscriptions, butcheries and murders that knew no restraint from mercy and humanity. The Romans, at length, suffered the penalty of their iniquitous deeds; and the world was vexed for three hundred years by the irruptions of Goths, Vandals, Ostrogoths, Huns, and innumerable hordes of barbarians.

I forbear to detail the victorious progress of Mahomet and the pious expeditions of Charlemagne. I will not enumerate the crusades against the infidels, the exploits of Aurungzebe {7} Gengiskan and Tamerlane, or the extensive murders of the Spaniards in the new world. Let us examine the civilized and favoured quarter of Europe, or even those countries of Europe which are thought most enlightened.

France was wasted by successive battles during a whole century, for the question of the Salic law, and the claim of the Plantagenets. Scarcely was this contest terminated, before the religious wars broke out, some idea of which we may form from the siege of Rochelle, where of fifteen thousand persons shut up eleven thousand perished of hunger and misery; and from the massacre of Saint Bartholomew, in which the numbers assassinated were forty thousand. This quarrel was appeased by Henry the fourth, and succeeded by the thirty years war in Germany for superiority with the house of Austria, and afterwards by the military transactions of Louis the fourteenth.

In England the war of Cressy and Agincourt only gave place to the civil war of York and Lancaster, and again after an interval to the war of Charles the first and his parliament. No sooner was the constitution settled by the revolution, than we were engaged in a wide field of continental warfare by king William, the duke of Marlborough, Maria Theresa and the king of Prussia.

And what are in most cases the pretexts upon which war is undertaken? What rational man could possibly have given himself the least disturbance for the sake of choosing whether Henry the sixth or Edward the fourth should have the style of king of England? What Englishman could reasonably have drawn his sword for the purpose of rendering his country an inferior dependency of France, as it must necessarily have been if the ambition of the Plantagenets had succeeded? What can be more deplorable than to see us first engage eight years in war rather than suffer the haughty Maria Theresa to live with a diminished sovereignty or in a private station; and then eight years more to support the free-booter who had taken advantage of her helpless condition?

The usual causes of war are excellently described by Swift. 'Sometimes the quarrel between two princes is to decide which of them shall dispossess a third of his dominions, where neither of them pretends to any right. Sometimes one prince quarrels with another, for fear the other should quarrel with him. Sometimes a war is entered upon because the enemy is too strong, and sometimes because he is too weak. Sometimes our neighbours want the things which we have, or have the things which we want; and we both fight, till they take ours, or give us theirs. It is a very justifiable cause of war to invade a country after the people have been wasted by famine, destroyed by pestilence, or embroiled by factions among themselves. It is justified to enter into a war against our nearest ally, when one of its towns lies convenient for us, or a territory of land, that would render our dominions round and compact. If a prince sends forces into a nation where the people are poor and ignorant, he may lawfully put the half of them to death, and make slaves of the rest, in order to civilize and reduce them from their barbarous way of living. It is a very kingly, honourable and frequent practice, when one prince desires the assistance of another to secure him against an invasion, that the assistant, when he has driven out the invader, should seize on the dominions himself, and kill, imprison or banish, the prince he came to relieve.'

If we turn from the foreign transactions of states with each other, to the principles of their domestic policy, we shall not find much greater reason to be

satisfied. A numerous class of mankind are held down in a state of abject penury, and are continually prompted by disappointment and distress to commit violence upon their more fortunate neighbours. The only mode which is employed to repress this violence, and to maintain the order and peace of society, is punishment. Whips, axes and gibbets, dungeons, chains and racks are the most approved and established methods of persuading men to obedience, and impressing upon their minds the lessons of reason. Hundreds of victims are annually sacrificed at the shrine of positive law and political institution. {10}

Add to this the species of government which prevails over nine tenths of the globe, which is despotism: a government, as Mr. Locke justly observes, altogether 'vile and miserable,' and 'more to be deprecated than anarchy itself².'

This account of the history and state of man is not a declamation, but an appeal to facts. He that considers it cannot possibly regard political disquisition as a trifle, and government as a neutral and unimportant concern. I by no means call upon the reader implicitly to admit that these evils are capable of remedy, and that wars, executions and despotism can be extirpated out of the world. But I call upon him to consider whether they may be remedied. I would have him feel that civil policy is a topic upon which the severest investigation may laudably be employed.

If government be a subject, which, like mathematics, natural {11} philosophy and morals admits of argument and demonstration, then may we reasonably hope that men shall some time or other agree respecting it. If it comprehend every thing that is most important and interesting to man, it is probable that, when the theory is greatly advanced, the practice will not be wholly neglected. Men may one day feel that they are partakers of a common nature, and that true freedom and perfect equity, like food and air, are pregnant with benefit to every constitution. If there be the faintest hope that this shall be the final result, then certainly no subject can inspire to a sound mind such generous enthusiasm, such enlightened ardour and such invincible perseverance.

The probability of this improvement will be sufficiently established, if we consider, FIRST, that the moral characters of men are the result of their perceptions: and, SECONDLY, that of all the modes of operating upon mind government is the most considerable. In addition to these arguments it will be found, THIRDLY, that the good and ill effects of political institution are not less conspicuous in detail than in principle; and, FOURTHLY, that perfectibility is one of the most unequivocal characteristics of the human species, so that the political, as well as the intellectual state of man, may be presumed to be in a course of progressive improvement.