



The Spirit of Laws (Contemporary Issues (Prometheus))

Baron Charles De Secondat Montesquieu

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The Spirit of Laws is one of the most influential books of all time. This masterpiece of political philosophy was widely read throughout Europe, attracted an especially enthusiastic readership in England, and had a profound effect on the framers of the American Constitution. Montesquieu (1689-1755), already famous and controversial through his Persian Letters, a work of his youth in which he humorously satirized the foibles of French society, turned in his later years to this serious treatise on the nature of law. But though the subject itself was profound, this gravitas did not inhibit the famous Montesquieu wit. Master of the pithy bon mot, he managed to survey a great deal of political and philosophical territory while keeping his readers charmed with memorable and artfully turned phrases. "Liberty," he says, "consists in the ability to do what one ought to desire and in not being forced to do what one ought not to desire." Concerning the unpopularity of the English in France, he says it is due to their arrogance, which is such that even in peace "they seem to negotiate with none but enemies."

The scope of this masterful work is truly prodigious. Montesquieu explores the essentials of good government; compares and contrasts despotism, monarchy, and democracy; and discusses the factors that lead to corruption of governments. Among the many other topics considered are education of the citizenry, crime and punishment, abuse of power and of liberty, individual rights, taxation, slavery, the role of women, the influence of climate on the temper of a people and their form of government, commerce, religion, and a host of additional subjects.

The Spirit of Laws is essential and genuinely enjoyable reading for anyone interested in the development of democracy.

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