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MONTESQUIEU'S CRITIQUE OF MONARCHY:  
A SELF-DESTRUCTIVE ANACHRONISM

Among scholars, especially in France, it has long been fashionable to suppose that Montesquieu was a partisan of the *ancien régime*. Some have thought him a reactionary, writing in the interests of a declining feudal class<sup>1</sup>; and there are others, far more numerous now, who attempt to square the circle by depicting him as an aristocratic liberal, persuaded that the prospects for liberty were at least as good under the

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This essay is an abbreviated restatement of an argument advanced in P. A. Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty: War, Religion, Commerce, Climate, Terrain, Technology, Uneasiness of Mind, the Spirit of Political Vigilance, and the Foundations of the Modern Republic*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2009, and is published here with the permission of the Yale University Press. I cite Charles-Louis de Secondat, baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes* (1921), ed. E. Mass, from *Œuvres complètes de Montesquieu*, ed. J. Ehrard, C. Volpilhac-Augier, et al., Oxford, UK: The Voltaire Foundation, 1998 -, I, p. 137-659, as *LP*, specifying the letter and, where appropriate, the line; Montesquieu, *De l'Esprit des lois* (1757), from *Œuvres complètes de Montesquieu*, ed. R. Caillois, Paris, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1949-51, II, p. 225-995, as *EL*, specifying the part, the book, the chapter, and, where appropriate, the page; and Montesquieu, *Mes pensées*, from *Œuvres complètes de Montesquieu*, ed. A. Masson, Paris, Les Éditions Nagel, 1950-55, II, p. 1-677, as *MP*, specifying the number. In citing Montesquieu's correspondence and his other work, I refer to the Masson edition as Nagel and to the Voltaire Foundation edition as VF. Unless otherwise specified, all translations are my own.

1. Cf. A. Mathiez, "La Place de Montesquieu dans l'histoire des doctrines politiques du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle", *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 7, 1930, p. 97-112; F. L. Ford, *Robe and Sword: The Regrouping of the French Aristocracy After Louis XIV*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1953, p. 222-45; F. L. Neumann, "Montesquieu", in *The Democratic and the Authoritarian State*, ed. H. Marcuse, Glencoe, IL, Free Press, 1957, p. 96-148 (at p. 106-13); and L. Althusser, *Politics and History: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Hegel and Marx*, tr. B. Brewster, London, NLB, 1972, p. 26-29, p. 96-106, with D. Richet, "Autour des origines idéologiques lointaines de la Révolution française: Élitisme et despotisme", *Annales ESC*, 24-1, January-February 1969, p. 1-23, and J. Ehrard, "La Signification politique des *Lettres persanes*", *Archives des lettres modernes*, 116, 1970, p. 33-50.

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French monarchy as they were in England, if not, in fact, better<sup>2</sup>. Those who regard him as a fierce critic of the *ancien régime* are now few and far between<sup>3</sup>.

Prior to the French Revolution<sup>4</sup>, however, readers of *The Spirit of Laws* were far less apt to regard its author as a friend to monarchy. The tax farmer Claude Dupin and his beautiful wife Louise-Marie-Madeleine Dupin had cordial relations with Montesquieu, but, when they perused his newly published book

2. Cf. É. Carcassonne, *Montesquieu et le problème de la constitution française au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1927; G. Loirette, "Montesquieu et le problème de France: Du bon Gouvernement", in *Actes du Congrès Montesquieu réuni à Bordeaux du 23 au 26 mai 1955*, Bordeaux, Imprimeries Delmas, 1956, p. 219-39; J.-J. Chevallier, "Montesquieu, ou Le Libéralisme aristocratique", *Revue internationale de la philosophie*, 9, 1955, p. 330-45; H. A. Ellis, "Montesquieu's Modern Politics: *The Spirit of Laws* and the Problem of Modern Monarchy in Old Regime France", *History of Political Thought*, 10-4, Winter 1989, p. 665-700; C. Spector, *Montesquieu, Les Lettres persanes: De l'Anthropologie à la politique*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1997, and *Montesquieu: Pouvoirs, richesses et sociétés*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2004; M. A. Mosher, "Monarchy's Paradox: Honor in the Face of Sovereign Power", in *Montesquieu's Science of Politics: Essays on the Spirit of Laws (1748)*, ed. D. Carrithers, M. A. Mosher, and P. A. Rahe, Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield, 2001, p. 159-229; J. Kent Wright, "A Rhetoric of Aristocratic Reaction? Nobility in *De l'Esprit des lois*", in *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century: Reassessments and New Approaches*, ed. J. M. Smith, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006, p. 227-51; and A. de Dijn, *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville: Liberty in a Levelled Society?*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 11-39 (esp. p. 20-32), with P. A. R. Janet, *Histoire de la science politique dans ses rapports avec la morale*, fourth edition revised, Paris, Félix Alcan, 1913, p. 323-28, p. 361-65. Note also B. Manin, "Montesquieu et la politique moderne", in *Cahiers de philosophie politique*, 2-3, Reims, Université de Reims, 1985, p. 157-229 (esp. p. 182-229), which is reprinted in *Lectures de L'Esprit des lois*, ed. C. Spector and T. Hoquet, Bordeaux, Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2004, p. 171-231.

3. See, however, D. Richet, "Autour des origines idéologiques lointaines de la Révolution française", p. 1-23, and M. Hulliung, *Montesquieu and the Old Regime*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1976, p. 15-107 (esp. p. 15-53), p. 173-230; and consider R. Halévi, "The Illusion of 'Honor': Nobility and Monarchical Construction in the Eighteenth Century", tr. M. Schwartz, in *Tocqueville and Beyond: Essays on the Old Regime in Honor of David D. Bien*, ed. R. M. Schwartz and R. A. Schneider, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 2003, p. 71-85, which should be read in conjunction with D. D. Bien, "Manufacturing Nobles: The *Chancellerie* in France to 1789", *Journal of Modern History*, 61-3, September 1989, p. 639-52, and "Aristocracy," in *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, ed. F. Furet and M. Ozouf, tr. A. Goldhammer, Cambridge, MA, The Belknap Press, 1989, p. 616-28. Note also T. L. Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism: A Commentary on The Spirit of the Laws*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1973.

4. The dramatic character of the shift in perspective that then took place is highlighted by a fraudulent attempt made at that time to foist the claim that Montesquieu was a reactionary on a contemporary of his who was, in fact, a great admirer: see F. Acomb, *Anglophobia in France, 1763-1789: An Essay in the History of Constitutionalism and Nationalism*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1950, p. 124-28, and R. Koebner, "The Authenticity of the Letters on the *Esprit des lois* Attributed to Helvetius", *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 24-69, May 1951, p. 19-43.

late in 1748 or early in 1749, they thought it shocking in the extreme – as did French churchmen at the time, Jansenist and Jesuit alike. The general view was that Montesquieu’s purpose was to ridicule and subvert the existing order, and, thanks in large part to this perception, the work was quickly condemned by the Sorbonne and placed on the Vatican’s Index of Prohibited Books<sup>5</sup>.

It is easy to see why so many of Montesquieu’s contemporaries should be inclined to respond in this fashion. The author of *The Spirit of Laws* was, after all, a known quantity. With an earlier work, he had shaped expectations, and no one who had read his *Persian Letters* with any care was likely to think him a partisan of monarchy. The most that one could say after working one’s way through that epistolary novel was that its author had stopped well short of contending that there was no difference between the French monarchy and the despotic regimes in Turkey and Persia. He had thought it sufficient to have his protagonist Usbek assert that monarchy is “a violent State” with a perpetual tendency to “degenerate into a Despotism, or a Republic”; that it is not possible for “power” to be “shared equally between the People & the Prince”; that such an “equilibrium” is “too difficult to maintain”; that, in practice, “it is necessary that power diminish on one side while it grows on the other”; and that the prince, as “head of the Armies”, ordinarily has “the advantage” (*LP* 99.9-16)<sup>6</sup>.

In *The Spirit of Laws*, where he chose to speak in his own name, Montesquieu was less outspoken. The authorities had ignored the *Persian Letters*. The book was, after all, a novel. It was also published abroad. Its author had carefully

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5. Note R. Shackleton, “Montesquieu, Dupin and the Early Writings of Rousseau”, in *Reappraisals of Rousseau: Studies in Honour of R. A. Leigh*, ed. S. Harvey, M. Hobson, D. Kelley, and S. S. B. Taylor, Manchester, UK, Manchester University Press, 1980, p. 234-49, which is reprinted in R. Shackleton, *Essays on Montesquieu and on the Enlightenment*, ed. D. Gilson and M. Smith, Oxford, UK, The Voltaire Foundation, 1988, p. 183-96, and see A. J. Lynch, “Montesquieu and the Ecclesiastical Critics of *L’Esprit des Lois*”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 38-3, July-September 1977, p. 487-500. See also C.-J. Beyer, “Montesquieu et la censure religieuse de *L’Esprit des lois*”, *Revue des sciences humaines*, 70, 1953, p. 105-31. For a list of the passages singled out for criticism, see D. W. Carrithers, “Jansenist and Jesuit Censures of *The Spirit of Laws*”, in Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws: A Compendium of the First English Edition*, ed. D. W. Carrithers, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1977, p. 467-68. See also C. Lauriol, “La Condamnation de *L’Esprit des lois* dans les archives de la Congrégation de l’Index”, in *Montesquieu, Œuvre ouverte ? (1748-1755): Actes du Colloque de Bordeaux (6-8 décembre 2001, Bordeaux, bibliothèque municipale)*, ed. C. Larrère, Oxford, UK, Voltaire Foundation, 2005, p. 91-114.

6. For a more detailed analysis of Montesquieu’s critique of the French monarchy in this work than I have room to articulate here, see D. J. Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism: Women and Revolution in Montesquieu’s Persian Letters*, Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield, 1995, and P. A. Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty*, I.ii-iii.

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refrained from putting his name on the title page; and it first appeared under the Regency, when Louis XIV was in bad odor and censorship lax. Montesquieu would not have gotten away with such a provocation later, after Louis XV came of age. This Voltaire learned to his regret in 1734 when the authorities responded to the clandestine publication of his *Philosophical Letters* by arresting his printer, by having the public hangman burn his satirical book, and by issuing a *lettre de cachet* providing for its author's incarceration should he be found in France. Of this return to intolerance, Montesquieu took careful note. It caused him to suppress a work in which he had intended to launch a savage critique of the imperial policy, imitative of Rome, persistently pursued by Europe's greatest monarchs, most notably, the Sun King of France<sup>7</sup>, and it occasioned on his part in composing *The Spirit of Laws* a certain respect for the unwritten "rules of discretion" laid down by the monarchy in France (MP 1462). He was perfectly aware that it would be dangerous for him to denounce absolute monarchy as despotism, and he had come to think such an act counter-productive. It was principally with his own country in mind that Montesquieu prefaced his *Spirit of Laws* with the admonition: "One senses abuses long-standing, and one sees their correction; but one sees as well the abuses inherent in the correction itself. One allows the ill if one fears that which is worse" (EL Préf.). In the circumstances, he thought, it was not just safer, it was apt to do more good, that he praise the French polity for the good qualities that it might still pretend to possess.

## JUSTICE

In practice, this meant that, if he wished to convey to his more thoughtful readers something too provocative to be broadcast openly, he had to do so in an oblique fashion, by indirection, and this he did. In *The Spirit of Laws*, he restated the argument concerning France that he had advanced with such bravado in the *Persian Letters*, but he did so *sotto voce*, elaborating at length on the genuine virtues of the monarchy and only hinting at the defects likely to be fatal to it. Where, in the latter work, he had singled out the love of glory as a salutary species of self-forgetfulness, a "fortunate fantasy" distinctively French (LP 87.1-30), he now specified that the love of "honor" is "the principle" or passion that sets monarchy in motion (EL 1.3.1-2, 5-8). It gives rise, he suggested, to a certain politeness on the part of those in its grip, and it makes men sociable, teaches them good taste, and inspires in them a certain joy in living (1.4.2, 2.9.7, 3.19.5). At the same time, he contended, the

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7. See P. A. Rahe, "The Book That Never Was: Montesquieu's *Considerations on the Romans* in Historical Context", *History of Political Thought*, 26-1, Spring, 2005, p. 43-89.

existence of a nobility subject to the code of honor limits the monarch's freedom of maneuver, prevents his exercise of power from becoming arbitrary, and gives rise to tempering, modifications, accommodations, terms, equivalents, negotiations, remonstrances, and a propensity to propose alternative policies which elicit from the prince and his court a species of enlightenment that one would not otherwise find in the government of one alone (1.3.10, 5.10, 6.4). Above all, he argued, the spirit of honor sustains the rule of law and engenders within monarchy's subjects a "spirit of liberty" apt to "contribute as much to happiness as liberty itself" (1.2.4, 5.10 6.1, 5-6, 9, 21, 2.11.7-11). It is easy to see why so many scholars think Montesquieu an unabashed admirer of the French monarchy. He evidenced a keen and genuine appreciation of its virtues.

He was also well aware that the advantages attendant on monarchy are purchased at a very high price. For understandable reasons, when he addressed the question of monarchy in his published works, Montesquieu was noticeably reticent with regard to its conformity with the demands of justice. In fact, nowhere therein did he even raise the obvious and unavoidable question: whether a regime of "artificial preferences & distinctions" (1.3.6-7) can be made compatible with what one can infer in this regard from the natural equality of man (1.1.2-3, 8.3, 3.15.7, 17.5). In private, however, as one would expect, he was more forthcoming. There, he was perfectly capable of commenting on the "reasons why republics become more flourishing than countries governed by one alone", and in his *Pensées*, where he jotted down for future consideration "detached reflections ... not plumbed to the depths", he was prepared to emphasize not only the "greater security" conferred within such governments on "that which one has acquired", the fact that republics inspire "greater love for the public good and the Fatherland" than do monarchies, and their propensity to offer "more means for succeeding by way of personal merit and fewer for succeeding by way of base behavior". He was also ready to acknowledge as a highly significant advantage the fact that republics provide "greater equality of condition and, in consequence, greater equality of fortune". If, he explained, one wishes "to form a monarchical state", it is requisite to have "a rich nobility that has authority and privileges vis-a-vis a people in poverty". The unspoken truth of monarchical government is not just "luxury" and "expenditure in the Nobility". It is also "misery in the People" (*MP* 1-3, 1760).

It is in light of these observations that we should interpret the cryptic, carefully worded claims that, some years before, Montesquieu had Usbek advance in the *Persian Letters*: that "gentleness in Government contributes marvelously to the propagation of the species"; that "all the Republics are a steady proof of this"; and that "it is not the same in Countries subject to arbitrary power". For, in this context, when Usbek emphasizes that civic

equality promotes “equality in fortunes” and points to the concentration of property in the hands of “the Prince, the Courtiers, & certain individuals” and “the extreme poverty” under which “all others groan” where the government is arbitrary (*LP* 118), he is clearly speaking in such a fashion as to remind Montesquieu’s French readers of their own country, where the population was generally thought to be in decline. The polemical character of Montesquieu’s remarks is even more obvious, however, in the parallel chapter that would later appear in *The Spirit of Laws* – where, initially, he would emphasize the unfortunate demographic consequences that ensue when “the clergy, the prince, the towns, the great ones, certain leading citizens imperceptibly become proprietors of the entire country” and leave large parts of it “uncultivated”, as was, he had no need to say, the case in France; and where he would then suggest that, in such a situation, the only way to promote population growth is to redistribute the land and to provide the citizens with the means for clearing and cultivating it (*EL* 4.23.28).

### GLORY’S BITTER FRUITS

Monarchy has other grave defects, apart from its propensity to promote inequality and injustice, and Montesquieu was especially sensitive to these. Where all are inclined to “judge men’s actions not as good but as beautiful, not as just but as grand, not as reasonable but as extraordinary” (1.4.2), honor’s reign will have consequences, he intimates, which are neither good nor just nor reasonable. Because of the ethos of honor, monarchies take as their “object” the prince’s “glory & that of the state” (2.11.5). In them, “men of war have no object other than glory, or at least honor or fortune” (1.5.19, p. 304); and though this “desire for glory” may well be a “fantasy” indicative of a profound forgetfulness of self, it is not as “fortunate” as Usbek had been inclined to suppose (cf. *LP* 87.1-30). To be precise, as a result of this particular desire’s dominion over the imagination, “the spirit of monarchy is war & aggrandizement” (*EL* 2.9.2), and there is nothing salutary about this. “Above all”, writes Montesquieu when he turns to the question of war, “let us not speak of the glory of the prince: his glory is his pride”. Indeed, wherever one derives “the right of war” from “the arbitrary principles of glory”, there, in that very place, “streams of blood will inundate the earth” (2.10.2).

Montesquieu’s misgivings in this last regard were nothing new. In the *Persian Letters*, by way of preparing an assault on the manner in which “the particular quarrels” and prickly honor of princes such as Louis XIV had been made a ground for going to war, he had had Usbek denounce “public Law” as it had come to be practiced under Machiavellian influence throughout Europe (*LP* 91-92). It would not be unfair to say, Usbek observed, “that the passions of the Princes, the patience of the Peoples, the flattery of the Writers

have corrupted all of its principles”. In consequence, he added, it has become “a Science that teaches Princes just how far they can go in violating justice without upsetting their interests”. It is a “design” forged by “the desire to reduce iniquity to a system for the sake of hardening their consciences” (91.1-14).

Montesquieu was not a willfully blind, unbending opponent of war<sup>8</sup>. He recognized that there are worse things, such as the loss of liberty and the provisions for personal security that accompany it. He acknowledged war’s “necessity”; he contended that, when genuinely necessary, the decision for war is derived from “rigid justice” (EL 2.10.2). In the *Persian Letters*, he had been willing to have Usbek acknowledge that a people under attack could justly defend themselves and that they could come to the aid of an ally under assault (LP 92.12-13). In *The Spirit of Laws*, where he spoke in his own name and examined the question with much greater precision, he went considerably further. There, he discussed the conditions necessary for the justification of preventive war (EL 2.10.2); he hinted at the vital importance of resisting the quest for universal monarchy; and he intimated what he could not openly say: that England, Holland, and Austria had been in the right in 1702 when they launched the War of the Spanish Succession against Louis XIV (5.26.23)<sup>9</sup>. What Montesquieu objected to was not balance-of-power politics: it was the policy personified by the Sun King of France – the making of war on the basis of what he termed with evident disdain “the arbitrary principles of glory, of decorum (*bienséance*), of utility” (2.10.2).

In a war justified solely on the basis of such arbitrary principles, Montesquieu observed, the fruits of victory rarely, if ever, justify the sacrifices made. To begin with, aggrandizement on a large scale is inconsistent with monarchy’s survival. There is, after all, a connection between the extent of a state’s territory and the form of government that it can support. Republics must be small and monarchies, moderate in size. “A great empire presupposes on the part of the one who governs an authority despotic. Promptness in decision-making is required to compensate for the distance of the places to which orders are sent; fear is required to prevent negligence on the part of the governor or magistrate operating at a great distance; law must be lodged in a single head and it must change unceasingly, for accidents multiply in a

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8. See M. L. Perkins, “Montesquieu on National Power and International Rivalry”, *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 238, 1985, p. 1-95 (esp. p. 72-82), and M. Belissa, “Montesquieu, *L’Esprit des lois* et le droit des gens”, in *Le Temps de Montesquieu: Actes du colloque international de Genève (28-31 octobre 1998)*, ed. M. Porret and C. Volpilhac-Auger, Geneva, Droz, 2002, p. 171-85.

9. See Montesquieu, *MP* 1900, which was prudently excised from the chapter cited and corresponds more closely with its title than do the four paragraphs left intact.

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state in proportion to its magnitude” (1.8.15-20). In practice, this means that monarchy is governed by an aspiration apt, if fulfilled, to eventuate in its dissolution. It is with this fact in mind that Montesquieu restates the conclusion that Usbek had voiced on his behalf in the *Persian Letters*: “Rivers run together into the sea: monarchies advance to lose themselves in despotism” (1.8.17).

Needless to say, the process by which monarchy engages in aggrandizement and gives way to despotism is exceedingly grim. “Ordinarily, in a monarchy which has long labored for conquest”, Montesquieu reports, “the provinces of its original domain are thoroughly crushed. They have to suffer abuses both new & old, & often a vast capital, which engulfs everything, has deprived them of population”. If the monarch were to treat his new provinces as he treated his old, “the state would be lost”. The provinces that he had conquered would send taxes to the capital, and nothing would return; the frontiers would be ruined and would become weak; the peoples there would be disaffected; and the subsistence of his armies would be precarious. Such, then, is “the necessary condition of a conquering monarchy: a frightful luxury in the capital, destitution in the provinces at some distance, abundance at the extremities” (2.10.9).

If there is an element of passion and a sense of immediacy in this last set of passages, it is because Montesquieu is here describing the France of Louis XIV into which he was born<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, the France of Louis XV, in which Montesquieu lived most of his life, persisted in embracing the “arbitrary principles” that had guided the Sun King’s conduct, and it refused to acknowledge the fact, made evident during the War of the Spanish Succession, that, even when stretched to the limit, the French kingdom could not marshal the resources requisite for so ambitious a projection of power<sup>11</sup>. In 1740, France had joined Prussia in launching a war against Austria, aimed at placing a French nominee on the throne of the Holy Roman Emperor and at dismantling the Hapsburg empire. This war, in which France was to find itself locked in combat with Austria on the continent and with Great Britain in India, in the New World, and on the high seas, Montesquieu regarded as wholly unnecessary, profoundly unjust, and foolish in the extreme; and in the months in which he dispatched *The Spirit of Laws* in its various parts to his publisher

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10. See Letter to l’abbé Niccolini on 6 March 1740, in Nagel III 1000-1001, where Montesquieu reports that Paris has devoured the provinces in its vicinity.

11. See C. B. A. Behrens, *The Ancien Régime*, New York, Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1967, p. 138-62, and B. Stone, *The Genesis of the French Revolution: A Global-Historical Interpretation*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 20-63.

in Geneva, he must have been in considerable distress, for the war, which had once again bankrupted France, was then still underway<sup>12</sup>.

Montesquieu's indictment of the spirit of monarchy applied in peacetime as well. When he first examines the question of taxation, he issues a warning against the propensity, prevalent in monarchies, to sacrifice "the real needs of the people" to "the imaginary needs of the state". These latter are pursued in consequence of "the passions & weaknesses of those who govern". They arise from "the charm of an extraordinary project, the sick envy of vainglory, & a certain powerlessness of the mind against its fantasies". All too often, Montesquieu observes, "those with an uneasy spirit" have risen "under the prince to the head of affairs" and have confused "the needs of the state" with "the needs of their little souls" (2.13.1). In consequence of this, he observes,

"A new malady has extended itself across Europe: it has seized our princes & causes them to keep an inordinate number of troops. It has its redoublings & of necessity it becomes contagious: since, as soon as one state augments that which it calls its troops, the others immediately augment theirs in such a fashion that one gains nothing by this apart from the common ruin. Each monarch keeps on foot all the armies that it would be possible for him to have if his peoples were in danger of being exterminated; & one calls peace this condition in which all strive against all. In this fashion Europe is so ruined that individuals who were in the situation in which the three most opulent powers of this part of the world find themselves would have nothing on which to live. We are poor with the wealth & commerce of the entire universe; & soon, as a consequence of having soldiers, we will have nothing but soldiers, & we shall be like the Tartars".

The ultimate result, Montesquieu explains, is "the perpetual augmentation of taxes", and ruling out "remedies in the time to come" is the fact that "one no longer reckons on one's revenues" alone and that "one makes war with one's capital" as well (2.13.17).

In the privacy of his notebooks, Montesquieu went even further, contemplating a prospect that was unthinkable. Alluding to the mutinies which had

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12. Note *MP* 1452, 1466, 1623; see Letters to Martin Ffolkes on 21 January 1743 and to François, comte de Bulkeley, on 20 October 1748, in Nagel III 1033-34, 1137-38; and consider C.-J. Beyer, "Le Rôle de l'idée de postérité chez Montesquieu", in *La Fortune de Montesquieu: Montesquieu écrivain*, ed. L. Desgraves, Bordeaux, Bibliothèque Municipale, 1995, p. 65-72.

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taken place within the French army among unpaid troops in the aftermath of the War of the Spanish Succession, he hinted at the likelihood that within Europe military despotism on the Roman model would in due course emerge. “So many troops”, he mused. “Someday they will sense their strength” (*MP* 1345)<sup>13</sup>.

## REVOLUTIONS IN COMMERCE

There was, Montesquieu was persuaded, another dimension to modern monarchy's plight, and it turned on the question of commerce. To grasp fully what is involved, one must attend to the fact that Montesquieu was persuaded that historical change, if unlikely to be reversed, can more or less permanently alter the political playing field. He makes it clear, for example, that the rise of Christianity put an end to virtuous republicanism (*EL* 1.4.4), and he devotes an entire book of *The Spirit of Laws* to tracing the revolutions that have marked the progress of commerce (4.21).

On the face of it, the liberation of commerce from political control and the vast expansion afforded it by the discovery of the compass, the improvements in ship design, and the new trade routes to Africa, America, and Asia opened up by the great voyages of discovery should have been highly advantageous to Europe's monarchies. If commerce produced economic inequality, as assuredly it would, this would be all to the good. If it encouraged luxury, that, too, would be of advantage in a polity inclined to whimsy, insistent on hierarchy, and apt to give free rein to the frivolity of women. Montesquieu in no way shrinks from announcing the fact that, “in the government of one alone”, commerce will “ordinarily be founded on luxury”. Nor does it bother him in the least that such “a commerce of luxury” will have as its “principal object: procuring for the nation pursuing it everything which serves its pride, its delights, & its fantasies”. In a polity distinguished by great disparities in wealth, it is the luxury of the rich that enables the poor to live (1.7.4, 4.20.4). “Vanity” Montesquieu commends as a “good motive for government”. It produces “goods without number. From it”, as his compatriots have shown, “are born luxury, industry, the arts, fashion, politeness, taste” (3.19.9). Without it, in fact, the French could not display the qualities that make them so attractive to all the world: “a sociable humor, an openness of heart, a joy in living, a taste, a facility for communicating their thoughts” (3.19.5-8)<sup>14</sup>. Without it, they could not fund their wars and replenish their nobility (4.20.22).

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13. Cf. Montesquieu, *MP* 1729, which was drafted for inclusion in *EL* 2.10. Note also *MP* 1518, 1899.

14. See also *LP* 61, 85, 96-97 and *MP* 1439, 1553.

Monarchy may favor a “commerce of luxury” and be favored by it in turn, but it is by no means clear that it can profit from an expansion of trade on the scale that characterized seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. To begin with, monarchy requires a set of practices regarding landed property which effectively rule out its treatment as a commodity. If the nobility is to be sustained, it must be hereditary and there must be primogeniture. For similar reasons, “noble lands will have privileges just as noble persons do”, for, just as “one cannot separate the dignity of the monarch from that of his realm”, so “one can hardly separate the dignity of the noble from that of his fief”. This requires that there be “substitutions” designed to “preserve goods within families” and laws providing for “redemption” so that descendants can recover “for the family lands which the prodigality of a parent has alienated”. These infringements on the exchange of landed property inevitably “do harm to commerce”, and this recognition leads Montesquieu to argue that they not be extended in any unnecessary way. In monarchies, he contends, “it is necessary that the laws favor all the commerce that the constitution of this government is able to tolerate so that the subjects can, without perishing, satisfy the requirements, ever-recurring, of the prince & his court” (1.5.9).

To this, we can add that monarchical government fosters tastes that are not conducive to the conduct of what Montesquieu calls “the commerce of economy”. Because this species of commerce “is founded”, as the name suggests, on economizing, which is to say, “on the practice of gaining little & even of gaining less than any other nation, & of securing compensation for itself solely through gaining incessantly, it is hardly possible that it could be pursued by a people among whom luxury is established – who spend large sums & notice only objects that are grand”. This would not much matter were it not for the fact that it is only in states practicing “the commerce of economy” as their mode of subsistence that one finds “the greatest enterprises”, for the citizens “there possess an audacity not to be found in monarchies”. Their boldness arises from a natural process peculiar to “the commerce of economy”, for, in a polity favorable to such trading practices, “one species of commerce leads to another, the small to the middling, the middling to the grand” – so that “he who has had so great a desire to gain a little puts himself in a situation in which he has no less desire to gain a great deal”. Moreover, despite their taste for grandeur, monarchies are unfriendly to “the great enterprises of commerce”. These are “always necessarily mixed with public affairs”, which, “in monarchies most of the time”, are regarded as “suspect” by merchants uncertain as to the safety of “their property”. Only where one is supremely confident “that what one has acquired is secure, does one dare expose it in order to acquire more”, for in such a place “one runs a risk only with regard to the mean of acquisition” (4.20.4).

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Trading companies illustrate the problem in one way; banks, in another. Associations of merchants, such as Britain's East India Company, cannot be introduced "into countries governed by one alone" because they "give to private wealth the strength of public wealth" and thereby threaten the power of the prince. Fiduciary institutions provide the "credit" necessary for "the commerce of economy". To suppose them compatible with monarchy, however, would be "to suppose silver on the one side & on the other power: which is to say, on the one side, the capacity to possess everything without any power; &, on the other, power without any such capacity at all". In such a polity, "no one but the prince has secured or been able to secure a treasure; & wherever there is a treasure, as soon as it seems excessive, right then it becomes the treasure of the prince" (4.20.10). Monarchy may in most respects be a far cry from despotism, and in modern times its inclination to abuse power when tempted by riches may be checked in some measure by an awareness of the consequences attendant on the merchants' use of the letter of exchange (4.21.20), but it nonetheless requires a measure of hierarchy and subordination inconsistent with the massive concentration of movable wealth in private hands that is necessary if a nation is to take full advantage of the possibilities afforded commercial enterprise in a mercantile age.

Montesquieu was among the first to recognize and reflect on the institutional constraints dictating that, whenever the French monarchy made a wholehearted effort to project power within Europe and beyond, it courted insolvency and brought itself to the verge of bankruptcy – but he was by no means the last. Money really had become the sinews of war; and, in the wake of the War of the Spanish Succession, circumstances repeatedly conspired to bring this difficulty to the attention of those who governed France. To an astonishing degree, French political discourse in the second half of the eighteenth century revolved around the problem posed – within a world dominated by fiscal-military states – by the need to promote confidence and properly finance the public debt<sup>15</sup>.

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15. After reading J. Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688-1783*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1990, see M. Sonenscher, "The Nation's Debt and the Birth of the Modern Republic: The French Fiscal Deficit and the Politics of the Revolution of 1789", *History of Political Thought*, 18-1, Spring 1997, p. 64-103 and 18-2, Summer 1997, p. 267-325, and *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2007, who documents this obsession on the part of the French and attempts to make sense of the various schemes devised for coming to grips with the problem.

In Montesquieu's opinion, the obstacles to the monarchy's solving this problem were insuperable<sup>16</sup>. He was arguably right<sup>17</sup>. If a monarchy were to confront and overcome the institutional logic that he had identified; if, in the interests of national prosperity and the military power made possible by such prosperity, it were somehow willing and able to curb its aversion to such concentrations of wealth; if it somehow managed to foster a "commerce of economy" supplementing the "commerce of luxury" natural to it; and if it also succeeded in establishing institutions and practices sufficient to instill in the world's merchants both the conviction that the riches that they acquired in grand commercial enterprises would be secure under its rule and the illusion that the public debt would eventually be paid, it is by no means clear that this monarchy would thereby gain in stability and strength. The fact that commerce fosters economic inequality in no way alters the fact that it promotes social equality at the same time. "Commerce is", as Montesquieu puts it, "the profession of equal people" (1.5.8). It brings human beings together within a sphere in which the transactions that occur presuppose the absence of any distinctions of status or rank worth noticing. To the extent that the spirit of commerce permeates a monarchical society and propagates within it the norms and expectations of the marketplace, it will subvert its principle. When Montesquieu remarks that "commerce cures destructive prejudices", he has more in mind than he is willing on this occasion to say (4.20.1). One is left wondering whether he is not intimating that, within what would later come to be called the *ancien régime*, commerce is not, in fact, a Trojan Horse.

Indeed, it is not even clear that "the commerce of luxury", when it extends itself to the fullest extent possible, is favorable to the monarchical principle – especially where, as in the case of France, it fosters the growth of large towns and of a great capital. "The more there are of men together", Montesquieu observes with an eye to Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*, "the more vain they are & the more they sense the birth in themselves of the desire to draw

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16. Cf. M. Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge*, p. 95-172, who contends that Montesquieu thought the contrary, with H. C. Clark, *Compass of Society: Commerce and Absolutism in Old Regime France*, Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2007, p. 111-14, p. 121-29, who demonstrates that Montesquieu was far less sanguine with regard to French than with regard to British commerce.

17. After digesting D. Bien, "Offices, Corps, and a System of State Credit: The Uses of Privilege under the Ancien Régime", in *The Political Culture of the Old Regime*, ed. K. M. Baker, Oxford, Pergamon Press, 1987, p. 87-114; M. Kwass, *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation in Eighteenth-Century France: Liberté, Egalité, Fiscalité*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2000; and G. Bossenga, "The Patrimonial State, Markets, and the Origins of the French Revolution", *1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era*, 11, 2005, p. 443-509, see D. Stasavage, *Public Debt and the Birth of the Democratic State: France and Great Britain, 1688-1789*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

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attention to themselves in trivial ways. If they are so great in number that the majority are unknown to one another, the desire to distinguish oneself redoubles because there is more hope of success. Luxury gives this hope; each assumes the marks of the condition given precedence to his own. But as a consequence of the wish to distinguish themselves all become equal, & one distinguishes oneself no longer: where everyone wishes to make himself noticed, no one is noticed at all". From all of this, Montesquieu reports, there arises "a general discomfort" rooted in a profound and inescapable disharmony "between needs & means" – for the citizens of the ancient Greek republics that were endowed with "singular institutions" were correct in their suspicion that, if they failed to proscribe "silver" and the commerce that coinage facilitates, these would "multiply infinitely their desires & supplant nature, which has given us very limited means for irritating our passions & for corrupting one another". As a consequence of the vanity which commerce favors and is favored by, men gathered together in cities and towns come to have "more desires, more needs, more fantasies". Commerce can never increase their means at a rate faster than vanity augments what they take to be needs. It is in "the nature of commerce", Montesquieu tells us, "to render superfluous things useful & useful things necessary" (1.4.6, 7.1, 4.20.23). The profound discomfort to which commercial civilization gives rise and the equality of condition associated with it can hardly have been favorable to the long-term prospects of continental Europe's great monarchies.

Montesquieu was aware of the problem well before he is likely even to have heard of *The Fable of the Bees*. The French whom Usbek describes in the *Persian Letters* are obsessed with honor, with glory, and rank (LP 87-88). But, in Paris, in the final days of Louis XIV, we learn that a different ethos sets the tone. In that city, Usbek finds that "liberty & equality reign". There, one may be distinguished by "Birth, Virtue, even merit displayed in war", but, "however brilliant" one's origins and attainments "may be", these "do not save a man from the crowd, in which he is confounded. Jealousy of rank is there unknown. It is said that in Paris the man who holds first place is he who has the best horses for his Coach" (86.1-4). In consequence, among the Parisians, there appears an "ardor for work" and a "passion for self-enrichment" that "passes from condition to condition, all the way from the Artisans to the Great", for "no one likes being poorer than the one he sees immediately below him". Paris presents itself as a city where "interest" is revealed as "the greatest Monarch on the earth". There, "you will see a man who has enough to live on until the day of judgment, who works without ceasing, & risks shortening his days, to amass, says he, enough on which to live" (103.45-60)<sup>18</sup>. There, in short, you will see none but the bourgeois.

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18. See also LP 56.

In Usbek's Paris, wealth has evidently become the sole determinant of a man's standing, and the passion for honor, glory, and rank has lost its purchase. That, under the influence of commerce, this should happen in the capital of what Montesquieu will later call "the most beautiful monarchy in the world" (*EL* 1.5.10) bodes ill for this form of government – especially if, as Montesquieu seems to have been persuaded, "it is a great capital, above all else, that fashions the general spirit of a nation" (*MP* 1903), especially if, as he also claims, "it is Paris that makes the French" (1581), especially if we can take at face value Usbek's claim that "the same Spirit is conquering the Nation: one sees there nothing but work & industry" (*LP* 103.59-60). If the love of honor is the passion that serves as monarchy's principle, if it and it alone sets monarchy in motion, Paris was in Montesquieu's day a grave threat to the regime, for honor's eclipse presages monarchy's arrest.

## ENLIGHTENMENT

These developments were of the greatest importance, but they would not have had quite as much disruptive potential, however, had monarchy not come under siege for other reasons as well. In the eighteenth century, Europe was caught up in a shift in sensibility and outlook every bit as profound as that which marked Christianity's rise to predominance, and there was no greater proponent of this transformation than Montesquieu himself (*EL* 5.25.13). In fact, Montesquieu's principal purpose in writing his *magnum opus* was to contribute to and encourage this salutary trend.

Towards the end of his *Spirit of Laws*, in a chapter at one point intended to serve as the work's conclusion, Montesquieu accuses Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Thomas More, James Harrington, and the various apologists for one-man rule of falling prey to their resentments, loves, and personal predilections. "In all times", he observes, "the laws come into contact with the passions & prejudices of the legislator. Sometimes they pass through & take on their color; sometimes they stop there & become incorporated with them" (6.29.19). From this propensity, he claims himself to be immune. "I have drawn my principles", he writes in the preface to his book, "not from my prejudices, but from the nature of things". Four paragraphs later, he spells out the practical import of his literary efforts. "It is not a matter indifferent that the people be enlightened", he asserts. "The prejudices of the magistrates had their beginning as the prejudices of the nation. ... I would believe myself the happiest of mortals if I could act in such a manner as to make it possible for human beings to cure themselves of their prejudices" (Préf.).

When Montesquieu speaks of "prejudices", he has in mind "not that which causes one to be unaware of certain things but that which causes one to be unaware of oneself". "Man" he describes as "that flexible being who

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accommodates himself in society to the thoughts & impressions of others”. As such, he “is equally capable of knowing his own nature when one shows it to him & of losing even the sentiment of it when one conceals it from him” (Préf.). In Montesquieu’s judgment, the task of the philosopher is to dispel human self-forgetfulness by bringing home to man just who and what he really is (1.1.1). From enlightenment in this regard, the French *philosophe* believes, a profound moral progress will ensue – for the “knowledge” produced by enlightenment is indistinguishable in its effects from the cosmopolitan spirit inspired by commerce. Just as “commerce cures destructive prejudices” and promotes “gentle mores” by causing a “knowledge of the mores of all the nations to penetrate everywhere” and by encouraging men to “compare” their own ways with those adopted elsewhere, so the “knowledge” produced by enlightenment will not only “enable human beings to cure themselves of their prejudices” but make them “gentle” – since “reason leads” men “to humanity”, and “only prejudices cause them to renounce it” (Préf., 3.15.3, 4.20.1).

There are two reasons why this development is pertinent to an assessment of monarchy’s long term prospects. To begin with, European monarchy was sacral in its character<sup>19</sup>, and the species of enlightenment that Montesquieu championed was, as he knew<sup>20</sup>, entirely incompatible with the requisite ethos of reverence and awe<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, even if one were to suppose that monarchy could somehow subsist in the absence of such a foundation on the strength of the passion for honor alone, it matters a great deal that the honor which animates this polity is, “philosophically speaking, a false honor” (1.3.7) – utterly inconsistent with what one learns concerning the fundamental equality of man when one contemplates human beings in their natural state (1.1.2-3, 8.3, 3.15.7, 17.5). False, however, it certainly is (1.5.19, 5.24.6) – and, therefore, this honor is more consistent with “vanity” than with any justifiable “pride” (3.19.9). It demands “preferences & distinctions” which have no foundation in nature at all. It is grounded, Montesquieu insists, in “the prejudice of each person & condition” (1.3.6-7). As such, it is constituted by a profound forgetting of self, and it is responsible for “the miserable character of

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19. See P. K. Monod, *The Power of Kings: Monarchy and Religion in Europe, 1589-1715*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1999.

20. After reading *LP* 22.24-42, see Montesquieu, “Discours sur les motifs qui doivent nous encourager aux sciences”, 15 November 1725, ed. S. Mason, esp. lines 1-52, in *VF* VIII 495-502 (esp. 495-98), and *MP* 1252, 1265, 1983.

21. See P. Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1992, p. 1-133 (esp. p. 125-33); then, consider J. W. Merrick, *The Desacralization of the French Monarchy in the Eighteenth Century*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1990.

courtiers”, who are distinguished by “ambition in idleness, baseness in pride, a desire to enrich oneself without work, an aversion for truth, flattery, treason, perfidy, the abandonment of all one’s engagements, contempt for the duties of the citizen, fear of the virtue of the prince, hope looking to his weaknesses, & ... the perpetual ridicule cast on virtue” (1.3.5)<sup>22</sup>.

In the long run, as Montesquieu surely understood, his quest to dispel prejudice would also be likely to sound a death knell for the monarchical order. It really is quite difficult to imagine how, in an increasingly commercial, communicative, cosmopolitan world, a “prejudice” rooted in artificial “preferences & distinctions”, subject at all times to the dictates of “whimsicality”, and associated with senseless aggrandizement, easily avoidable wars, and an intolerable tax burden can survive the quest to enlighten mankind and to remind men just who and what they really are. Although, in his *Spirit of Laws*, Montesquieu prudently refrained from spelling out in detail the implications of the vast expansion in commerce and those of the enlightenment project for the future of his native France, he had no need to exercise a similar self-restraint in the notebooks he kept.

There, in one entry, he acknowledged that “it appears that what one calls *heroic valor* is going to disappear in Europe” (MP 760). There, in another, he observed that “this spirit of glory and of valor is disappearing little by little among us”; and though he alluded to alterations in the *ius gentium*, to changes in the character of war, and to the manner in which monarchs rewarded their favorites at court and encouraged “idleness” on their part, he traced this development, first and foremost, to the fact that “philosophy has gained ground” and that “the ancient ideas of heroism and the new ones of chivalry have disappeared” (761). And there, in a third entry, he bluntly remarked that “philosophy and, I dare say, even a certain good sense has gained too much ground in this century for heroism to henceforth fare well”. The pursuit of glory had come to seem vain and “just a bit ridiculous”.

“Each century has its own particular genius: a spirit of disorder and independence was formed in Europe with the Gothic government; the monastic spirit infected the times of the successors of Charlemagne; thereafter the spirit of chivalry reigned; that of conquest appeared with regular troops; and it is the spirit of commerce that reigns today.

This spirit of commerce causes one to calculate everything. But glory, when it is entirely alone, enters into the calculations of none but fools”.

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22. In this connection, see J. Pappas, “La Campagne des philosophes contre l’honneur”, *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 205, 1982, p. 31-44, and H. C. Clark, *The Compass of Society*, p. 121-29 (esp. p. 123-25); then, note Montesquieu, *MP* 1062, 1272, 1340, 1491.

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Glory of the sort that guided Alexander is, he insisted, “chimerical” and is subject “to the same revolutions as prejudice” (810). It can withstand anything – apart from ridicule (575), the only thing now feared in France (1491); and “that which in other times one called *glory, laurels, trophies, triumphs, crowns* is today paid out in cash” (1602).

## EMASCULATION

In France, Montesquieu observed, the subversion of the ethos of honor accomplished by philosophy and commerce had also been powerfully reinforced by the peculiar species of “commerce with women” that had grown up in the shadow of the French court. Thanks to the influence that women exercise in and by means of the salon, he wrote, “all things in need of *esprit* have become ridiculous”, and the French “have lost their taste” for the tragedies of Corneille and Racine. Moreover, as a consequence of the fact that women – who are incapable of attachment “to anything fixed” – now sit in judgment on men, vanity in France has lost the focus that transformed it into a passion for honor, glory, and renown, and contemporary Frenchmen no longer have a capacity for sustained and concentrated effort. “Men of war cannot endure war”, and “men of affairs cannot endure the conduct of public business”. The serious particularities of ordinary political life have been drained of meaning and significance, and none but “general objects” – which, “in practice, come to nothing” – now receive acknowledgment. “In this fashion”, Montesquieu explained, men in France have been deprived of their manliness. “There is now only one sex, and we are all women in *esprit*; and, if one night we were to change in appearance, no one would perceive that there had been any other change. Even if women were to take up all of the responsibilities that Society confers and men were deprived of all those that Society can deny, neither sex would be discomfited” (1062)<sup>23</sup>.

There is no doubt a case to be made for “gallantry” of the sort for which Montesquieu’s compatriots were known, especially given the fact that women are, as he suggests in his *Spirit of Laws*, “quite enlightened judges with regard to a part of the things which constitute personal merit”. But, as the very same passage implies, there are “things” constitutive of “personal merit” that, in his estimation, women do not judge well at all (*EL* 6.28.22). As he explains elsewhere in his great book, the “commerce of gallantry ... produces laziness”. It “causes the women to corrupt even before they have themselves been corrupted”. It “gives to everything a price & lowers the value of what is

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23. Note also Montesquieu, *MP* 1271.

important”, and it “causes one to base one’s conduct solely on the maxims of ridicule that women understand so well how to establish”. In the end, as sexes, “the two sexes are spoiled: the one loses its distinctive and essential quality, as does the other; the arbitrary is introduced into that which was absolute” (1.7.7-8, 3.19.12)<sup>24</sup>.

## MONARCHY’S PLIGHT

Of course, the most incendiary of the remarks found in Montesquieu’s notebooks were left out of *The Spirit of Laws*, but they were excluded not because these particular ruminations were on their author’s part mere passing thoughts. In this case, as we have just seen, what he dared not say openly in his great book, he found ways to insinuate; and, in his discussion of monarchical government, he made his misgivings clear – so clear, in fact, that he thought it expedient that he expressly deny what was only too obvious: that what he was writing was intended, at least in part, as a satire on that form of government (1.3.6). It is in no way surprising that the depiction of monarchy in his *magnum opus* provoked a firestorm of criticism from intelligent readers (men and women, clerymen and laymen alike), for – despite and, perhaps, even because of his disclaimers – it was easy to infer what Montesquieu had carefully left unsaid. It was clear to his contemporaries, as it should be clear to anyone who pauses to reflect on the implications of Montesquieu’s insistent depiction of the principle of monarchy as “false honor”, that one cannot dispel “prejudice” in the manner that he proposes without violating the principle and rendering ridiculous and therefore insupportable the whimsical passion that is supposed to set monarchy in motion (1.3.6-7, 5.19, 5.24.6).

Montesquieu was not a revolutionary, but the evidence amassed here suggests that he remained wedded to Usbek’s view that monarchy is inherently unstable and prone to “degenerate into a Despotism, or a Republic” (*LP* 99.9-16), that he foresaw in the not too distant future what he pointedly alluded to in passing as a “dissolution of monarchies” (*EL* 1.5.11), and that his attempt to bolster the *parlements* and the nobility was aimed not just at halting France’s slide in the direction of despotism but also at preparing the way for its gradual transformation into a republic of sorts – modelled on the “republic concealed under the form of a monarchy” (1.5.19, p. 304) that had recently emerged on the other side of the English channel. Whatever misgivings Montesquieu may

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24. Cf. M. A. Mosher, “The Judgmental Gaze of European Women: Gender, Sexuality, and the Critique of Republican Rule”, *Political Theory*, 22-1, February 1994, p. 25-44.

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have entertained with regard to the English polity – and they were substantial<sup>25</sup> – he had little doubt that, in eighteenth-century circumstances, this form of government was more viable than monarchy and more in accord with the dictates of enlightenment, for it was not only less inclined to undertake unnecessary wars and better-situated for winning them; it was also better-suited to the conduct of a commerce of economy, more respectful of the natural equality of man, less likely to succumb to religious zealotry, and more sensitive to the claims of liberty than any other polity in Europe (2.11.6, 12.19, 13.12, 14, 3.19.27, 4.20.7).

Montesquieu favored caution, but he was by no means an opponent of regime change as such. The profound “disadvantage” associated with a transformation from one form of government to another, he wrote in his *Spirit of Laws*, “arises not when a state passes from a moderate government to a moderate government, as from a republic to a monarchy or from a monarchy to a republic, but when it collapses & hurls itself from a moderate government into despotism” (1.8.8). The transition from monarchy to republic can, he contended, be salutary and bracing in the extreme. “States often flourish more fully”, he observed, “during the passage unfelt from one constitution to another than they do under one constitution or the other. It is then that all the springs of the government are taut, that all the citizens lodge claims; that one is attacked or one is doted on; & that there is a noble emulation among those who defend the constitution in decline & those who advance the one that prevails”. Rome had once followed such a trajectory (2.11.13); and, even more to the point, so had England, as Montesquieu was fully aware (1.2.4). Why not, he thought, why not, then, France?

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25. See P. A. Rahe, “Forms of Government: Structure, Principle, Object, and Aim”, in *Montesquieu's Science of Politics: Essays on the Spirit of Laws (1748)*, ed. D. W. Carrithers, M. A. Mosher, and P. A. Rahe, Lanham, MD, Rowman and Littlefield, 2001, p. 69-108, and *Soft Despotism, Democracy's Drift: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Tocqueville, and the Modern Prospect*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2009.