

Enlightenment Political and Social Thought

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In 1748, after labouring for more than twenty years, Charles-Louis de Montesquieu finally published his masterpiece, the *Esprit des lois*. At two volumes of more than five hundred pages each, it was a massive tome. Not all readers found it easy to work their way through it: Voltaire complained that Montesquieu's book was 'un labyrinthe sans fil' ('an impenetrable labyrinth').¹ These complaints were not wholly unfounded. Montesquieu did indeed discuss a sometimes bewildering variety of topics, ranging from religious practices in far-flung places to the precise timing of the establishment of tithes in medieval France. (They were only established in the time of Charlemagne, he noted, not earlier as some scholars had claimed.)²

But Montesquieu did make some more general points as well. The theme of political freedom in particular is a recurring motif in the *Esprit des lois*. How to create and sustain a free political regime? In answer to that question, Montesquieu presented his readers with two different suggestions. Most famously, he depicted the English constitution as the freest form of government imaginable. In the wake of their revolution, Montesquieu explained, the English had stumbled upon a form of government in which different forms of power were exercised by different institutions, so that these checked each other and abuses were prevented. While executive power was exercised by the king, Parliament had won control over legislative power. Judicial power had remained in the hands of the common people, who, as jurors, decided over guilt and innocence.

But the English constitution was not the only model Montesquieu presented as a form of government capable of guaranteeing freedom. He waxed equally enthusiastic about moderate monarchies – a political system exemplified by his own country, France, in which royal power, while in principle

¹ Voltaire, *Œuvres de 1767–1768*, ed. N. Cronk, Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2011, p. 209.

² C.-L. de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, *L'Esprit des lois*, XXXI.12, ed. R. Derathé, rev. D. de Casabianca, 2 vols, Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2011, II, 374–7.

absolute, was checked through the existence of various ‘*pouvoirs intermédiaires*’ such as the nobility or the *parlements*. While these intermediary powers were officially subordinate to the king, their social power and historical prestige made sure that they were capable of stemming royal power when it over-reached and violated existing laws. Moreover, the strong sense of honour animating individual noblemen and *parlementaires* meant that they were also motivated to act as checks on royal power, as was illustrated by the story of the Viscount d’Orte. This sixteenth-century French nobleman, Montesquieu pointed out, had resisted the order of Charles IX to massacre the Huguenots on Saint Bartholomew’s Day because he believed it would be dishonourable to kill innocent people even though the order came directly from the king.

Montesquieu refrained from stating explicitly which of these two models he preferred himself. It was clear that he considered the English constitution better calculated to deliver the maximum amount of freedom. But he also remarked that the ‘*liberté politique extrême*’ enjoyed by the English would not be palatable to everyone.³ A moderate monarchy, he repeatedly hinted, was probably more appropriate for the French as well as for other continental Europeans. It was clear, however, that Montesquieu believed that avoiding despotism in eighteenth-century Europe would require either adopting the British model with its strict separation of powers, or the French moderate monarchy with its intermediary bodies.

By making these arguments, Montesquieu was breaking with a well-established tradition in early modern political thought. Ever since the rediscovery of classical texts and authors during the Renaissance, political thinkers had come to look to ancient republics, in which citizens governed themselves rather than being governed by a monarch, as the best and indeed the only models of freedom. This tradition had found one of its earliest representatives in Niccolò Machiavelli, who in his *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* (‘Discourses on the First Ten Books of Livy’) had argued that the Roman Republic was the best political model for freedom-lovers. Romanophilia, and to a lesser extent, Grecophilia, had continued to flourish in the seventeenth century, especially in England and the Netherlands. Indeed, this mode of thinking was so well established that, in 1651, Thomas Hobbes blamed the mania for antiquity as the cause of the rebellions that plagued the reign of Charles I and many other European sovereigns. Reading these ancient

³ *L’Esprit des lois*, XI.6; I, 168–79.

authors, Hobbes complained, had convinced his contemporaries that all those who lived in monarchies were slaves, and that only republican citizens were free.⁴

In his youth, Montesquieu too had been susceptible to this enthusiasm for antiquity. In 1734, he published his *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence*. This work was primarily a historical investigation of the reasons why the Roman Republic had lasted as long as it did, and why it eventually collapsed. (Montesquieu attributed the demise of the Republic to the fact that the professionalization of the Roman army had handed over real power in the state to the army's generals instead of the citizenry.) But Montesquieu also made clear that he thought the Romans had an especially admirable government, because, thanks to their unique constitution, 'tout abus du pouvoir y pût toujours être corrigé' ('abuses of power could always be corrected').⁵ Even in his mature work, the *Esprit des lois*, Montesquieu was quite positive about the republics of antiquity, describing them as in many ways admirable political regimes that had been capable of maintaining the rule of law and hence political freedom.

But at the same time, Montesquieu made it quite clear in the *Esprit des lois* that these ancient republics should not be seen as suitable political models for eighteenth-century Europeans. Republican self-government, he now claimed, could function only under very specific conditions. It required a small state, since all citizens needed to be able to meet face to face in order to collectively make decisions. It also required a specific disposition in its citizenry. Without a virtuous citizenry, that is, a citizenry willing and able to put the public interest ahead of their own private interests, self-government would be impossible. Purely self-interested people, after all, would not be able to agree on anything much. This also meant, Montesquieu argued, that a republican political system would be hard to sustain in wealthy nations. Differences between rich and poor created dissensions within the citizenry and again hampered the social harmony required for republican self-government.

None of these conditions, Montesquieu made clear, prevailed in eighteenth-century France or indeed in the majority of the other European states. Modern states were simply too big for republican self-government to

⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 149–50.

⁵ *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence*, ch. 8, in Montesquieu, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. R. Caillois, 2 vols, Paris: Gallimard, 1949, II, 115.

work: it was ludicrous to think, for instance, that all the inhabitants of France could meet face to face. The rise of commerce, moreover, had made the world a much more prosperous place. Hence, social differences were much more pronounced than had been the case in antiquity, and rich people were keener on emphasizing these differences through their consumption of luxury items. This meant in turn that modern citizens were far less likely to be able to put the public interest ahead of their own, private interests. All of these developments might to a certain extent be regrettable. But they were also irreversible, Montesquieu believed. Hence, the republics of antiquity were not suitable models for modern-day peoples. If they wanted to be free, his contemporaries should either introduce the British constitutional system, or they should make sure that intermediary bodies such as the nobility or other traditional institutions were not further undermined by the monarchy.

Montesquieu was not alone in making these claims. Voltaire too made clear to his readers that he considered the republics of antiquity obsolete. In the brilliant ditty *Le Mondain* ('The Man of the World'), he made fun of the nostalgia for the golden age of antiquity expressed by many of his contemporaries, and declared himself quite happy with his own 'iron age' with its commercial hustle and bustle, its luxury and its artistic achievements.⁶ Voltaire further elaborated this theme in his later writings. In *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* (*The Century of Louis XIV*), first published in 1751, he famously described his own age as the most enlightened of all times, and described modern Europe as vastly superior to Ancient Rome. Eighteenth-century Paris, he noted, was a city that very much surpassed Rome and Athens at the height of their splendour. In *L'A, B, C, ou dialogues entre A.B.C.* (*The ABC, or Dialogues between A B C*, 1768), which is conceivably Voltaire's most important political work, he wrote that he was tired of books about ancient republics and devoted a chapter to developing the idea 'Que l' Europe moderne vaut mieux que l' Europe ancienne' ('that modern Europe is better than ancient Europe').⁷

Like Montesquieu, moreover, Voltaire advocated the English system as a better alternative for safeguarding freedom in modern Europe than the classical republics. Voltaire, indeed, can be seen as in many ways responsible for jump-starting a wave of Anglomania in eighteenth-century France with his *Lettres philosophiques* (*Philosophical Letters*). Written after a prolonged sojourn in England, and published in French in 1734 – a full fourteen years

⁶ Voltaire, *Writings of 1736*, ed. N. Cronk, Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2003, p. 295.

⁷ Voltaire, *Œuvres de 1767–1768*, p. 267.

before Montesquieu's *Esprit des lois* – Voltaire celebrated the English constitution as ‘ce gouvernement sage où le Prince, tout-puissant pour faire du bien, a les mains liées pour faire le mal, où les seigneurs sont grands sans insolence et sans vassaux et où le peuple partage le gouvernement sans confusion’ (‘that wise government in which the prince, all-powerful for doing good, is restrained from doing harm; where the lords, who lack insolence and vassals, are yet great; and where the common people share power without disorder’).⁸

At the same time, however, Voltaire also continued to support, again much like Montesquieu, the political system under which he lived, that is, the monarchy of eighteenth-century France. In his *Pensées sur l'administration publique* (*Thoughts on Public Administration*), for instance, a collection of political maxims, Voltaire vehemently denied allegations that the French were a nation oppressed by kings and priests – property rights, for instance, he argued, were as secure in France as in any other country in the world.⁹

There were, of course, real differences between Voltaire and Montesquieu as well. While Voltaire praised his older contemporary for his love of freedom and hatred of tyranny, he objected to Montesquieu's claim that the only way to avoid despotism in a monarchy was by bolstering traditional intermediary bodies. According to Voltaire, the idea that institutions such as the *parlements* could act as bulwarks for freedom was preposterous. Montesquieu's praise for these institutions was, in Voltaire's view, merely self-serving: it was because Montesquieu himself was a member of the *Parlement* of Bordeaux that he had depicted the *parlements* as a bulwark of freedom. (If a spice merchant talked about legislation, Voltaire joked, he would want everyone to buy cinnamon and nutmeg.)¹⁰

But these differences should not be overstated. They might have had as much to do with personal rivalry as with political conviction. At the end of the day, Montesquieu's and Voltaire's assessments of how best to preserve political freedom show decidedly more similarities than differences. With their rejection of ancient political models and their enthusiasm for both the British system and the moderate monarchy under which they lived, Montesquieu's and Voltaire's works illustrate that eighteenth-century political thought was characterized by a recovery of nerve vis-à-vis the ancient world. Both authors agreed that the science of politics had made such

⁸ Voltaire, *Lettres philosophiques*, Amsterdam: E. Lucas, 1734, letter 8, p. 67.

⁹ Voltaire, *Writings of 1750–1752*, Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2006, p. 324.

¹⁰ Voltaire, *Œuvres de 1767–1768*, p. 226.

considerable progress since antiquity that the classical texts of antiquity no longer held lessons for the present.

This new-found political self-confidence can to some extent be seen as an outgrowth of the so-called 'Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns', a primarily literary dispute triggered by Charles Perrault's shocking claim that 'modern' (i.e., seventeenth-century) authors had equalled and indeed surpassed their ancient models.¹¹ However, not all enlightened French political thinkers agreed with Montesquieu's and Voltaire's optimistic defence of 'modern' politics. Denis Diderot, for instance, rejected the idea that there had been considerable progress in politics since antiquity. While Diderot had been personally fond of Montesquieu, and was very proud of the fact that he was the only *philosophe* to have participated in Montesquieu's funeral procession, he profoundly disagreed with the latter's assessment of how best to preserve political freedom. In Diderot's contributions to the *Encyclopédie*, this criticism was muted: his article on 'Autorité politique' ('Political authority'), while causing a scandal for claiming that royal authority ultimately depended on popular consent, also praised the French monarchy as a political system very different from Turkish despotism.

In his later work, however, Diderot was less circumspect. After his contract for the *Encyclopédie* expired, Diderot became involved with the publication of the *Histoire des deux Indes* (*History of the Two Indies*). Abbé de Raynal was the credited author for this multi-volume work, but Diderot and others contributed substantial parts to it. In the passages he wrote, Diderot did not lay out a clearly defined and coherent political theory capable of competing with Montesquieu's and Voltaire's works. Diderot did repeatedly emphasize, however, that modern Europeans lived in the most abject tyranny. In addition, he also suggested on at least one occasion that primitive man was freer, and therefore happier, thus positing himself as a spokesman for a primitivism wholly at odds with Montesquieu's and Voltaire's views.

But Montesquieu's and Voltaire's most important critic in eighteenth-century France was of course Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau had grown up in the Genevan Republic, in which veneration for antiquity was particularly strong. As a young boy, he had read Tacitus, Plutarch and other antique writers with so much enthusiasm that, as he put it himself,

¹¹ See Terence Cave, 'Ancients and Moderns: France', in G. P. Norton (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 3: *The Renaissance*, Cambridge University Press (1999), pp. 417–25 and Chapter 21 above.

he had become a Roman. His early education had stuck. In his writings, Rousseau contemptuously rejected his contemporaries' admiration for the English example. The English were free, yes, but only during one brief moment, every seven years when parliamentary elections were held. At all other times, they were no better off than slaves. Rousseau also hinted (although more carefully, understandably considering the fact that he lived most of his life in France) that French-style monarchies, in which the king monopolized both executive and legislative power, were equal to despotism.

Freedom, Rousseau was convinced, could be enjoyed only in a republic modelled on ancient examples, where the people was able to directly govern itself. He was particularly enamoured of the Roman example. Although he also gave a few approving nods towards the Spartan model, it was the Roman Republic that Rousseau believed to be the best example of a free state. He discussed this model at length in his masterpiece, the *Contrat social*. Thus, Rousseau described in painstaking detail the complex Roman voting system, as well as other specifically Roman institutions such as the tribunate and the censorship. These chapters are typically neglected by contemporary readers in favour of the more abstract discussion of the principles of political legitimacy that takes up most of the *Contrat social*. Nevertheless, they are important because they make clear that Rousseau believed that the ideal state he outlined in the earlier parts of the *Contrat social* had to a large extent been realized in the Roman Republic.

At the same time, however, Rousseau admitted that it would be extremely hard to create and maintain a republic in the modern (i.e., eighteenth-century) world. First and foremost, he agreed with Montesquieu that republics could exist only in small states, where citizens could meet face to face. Second, and perhaps even more importantly, Rousseau again agreed with Montesquieu that public virtue had largely disappeared from the post-classical world, and that most eighteenth-century individuals were simply too self-interested to make a republican system work. There were of course exceptions: in some of Europe's smaller nations, like Rousseau's own Geneva, Corsica and Poland, citizens had not been totally corrupted and they could hence be organized as republics. But Rousseau had little hope that the nations in Europe's heartland would ever be able to introduce republican institutions. As he put it rather bluntly: 'La liberté, n'étant pas un fruit de tous les climats,

n'est pas à la portée de tous les peuples' ('Freedom, not being a fruit of every clime, is not within the reach of every people').¹²

By his own admission, in short, Rousseau's prescriptions were irrelevant for France and for most other European nations. Small wonder, then, that few of his contemporaries ended up sharing Rousseau's enthusiasm for antique political models. Only after the major upheaval of 1789 would the ancient republics seem like relevant political examples again.

¹² Rousseau, *Du contrat social*, III.8, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. B. Gagnebin and M. Raymond, 5 vols, Paris: Gallimard, 1959–95, III, 414.