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VIRTUE, COMMERCE AND MODERATION IN THE 'TALE OF THE TROGLODYTES': MONTESQUIEU'S PERSIAN LETTERS*

Donald A. Desserud

Montesquieu's description of the moderate regime based upon commerce, found in Book XIX.27 of the *Spirit of the Laws*,¹ has long been a puzzle to his readers.² It defies classification according to the types of government found in Book II.1 (despotism, monarchy and republic) and, moreover, his presentation contrasts sharply with his apparent admiration for the classical republic based upon virtue which dominates the first eight or so books of the *Spirit of the Laws*. Many of his readers have concluded that the description of the moderate regime based on commerce is evidence of Montesquieu's eventual rejection of his earlier more

* The author would like to thank Professor Jane Arscott, Dr Brian Crawley (Dalhousie University, Halifax), Dr Chris Doran, the students of my seminar on the origins of liberal-capitalist thought (University of New Brunswick at Saint John), and the anonymous referee of this journal, for invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

¹ *Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu*, ed. André Masson, Vols. I–III (Paris, 1950–1955), *l'Esprit des Lois* and the *Lettres Persanes* are found in Volume I. References to *l'Esprit des Lois* will be cited as *EL* with roman numbers for book number and arabic for chapter number, while references to the *Lettres Persanes* will be to the letter number. Other references to this edition will be cited as Masson and translations will be mine except as noted. I have made use of two English translations of Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*; *The Persian Letters*, ed. and trans. C.J. Betts (Middlesex, 1980); and *The Political Theory of Montesquieu* [selections from *Persian Letters*, *Considerations . . .*, and the *Spirit of the Laws*], ed. and trans. Melvin Richter (Cambridge, Mass., 1977). References to these editions will be to the name of their editor. The publication of the Cambridge edition (1989) of *The Spirit of the Laws*, ed. and trans. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller and Harold Samuel Stone, is a welcome addition to Montesquieu scholarship. This is the first complete English translation of the *Spirit of the Laws* we have had since Nugent's own in 1750. However, this translation is still untried and so, while I have used this edition, I have also indicated where I am unsure of their choices. All references to *The Spirit of the Laws* (*SL*) and all translations are to this edition, except where otherwise indicated.

² See Nannerl Keohane, 'Virtuous Republics and Glorious Monarchies: Two Models in Montesquieu's Political Thought', *Political Studies*, XX (1972), pp. 383–96; Nannerl Keohane, 'The President's English: Montesquieu in America 1976', *The Political Science Reviewer*, VI (1976), pp. 355–87; and Nannerl Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France: The Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1980). See also P.T. Manicas, 'Montesquieu and the Eighteenth Century Vision of the State', *History of Political Thought*, II (1981), pp. 313–47; Melvin Richter, 'The Uses of Theory: Tocqueville's Adaptation of Montesquieu', in *Essays in Theory and History*, ed. Melvin Richter (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 74–102; Robert Shackleton, *Montesquieu: A Critical Biography* (Oxford, 1961); Alberto Postigliola, 'En relisant de le chapitre sur la constitution d'Angleterre', in Postigliola et al., *La pensée politique de Montesquieu*, *Cahiers de philosophie politique et juridique* no. 7 (l'Université de Caen, 1985), pp. 7–28; and H.A. Ellis, 'Montesquieu's Modern Politics: The *Spirit of the Laws* and the Problem of Modern Monarchy in Old Regime France', *History of Political Thought*, X (1989), particularly p. 696. I have addressed this question at greater length in Donald A. Desserud, 'Beyond Virtue and Honour: Montesquieu's Analysis of the English Constitution' (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Western Ontario, London, Canada, 1989).

idealistic support for classical republicanism, and hence is evidence of inherent inconsistencies in Montesquieu's writings.³

However, whether or not the description of England found in the *Spirit of the Laws* XIX.27 represents Montesquieu's rejection of classical republicanism, it is not the first time he has presented a moderate regime based on commerce. A sequel to the famous 'Tale of the Troglodytes' from his *Persian Letters* (1721), unpublished in his lifetime, describes just such a regime. When we consider that this sequel concludes a tale which seems to be primarily concerned with praising a regime based on virtue, its examination should, at the very least, provide us with some insights into Montesquieu's understanding of the relationship between commerce and virtue.

It may also help us to resolve some of the apparent contradictions of the *Spirit of the Laws*,⁴ specifically concerning Montesquieu's puzzling treatment of England and its constitution.⁵ Recent scholarship has stressed Montesquieu's theory of moderate politics, suggesting that these contradictions exist only when we assume that Montesquieu was extolling the merits of a specific *species* of government (democracy, aristocratic republic, or monarchy) rather than a *type* of government (moderate).⁶ But

³ Montesquieu was himself quite aware of the problems his work would pose for his readers. 'All Europe has read my work', he writes, 'and everyone has conveyed that they cannot discover if I am more inclined towards a republican or monarchical government.' But Montesquieu does not help them very much. 'I have had very little desire to choose, because it happens that both governments are very good.' See also *Pensées* # 942, Masson II, p. 267: 'Many men have considered which is better, monarchy, aristocracy or the popular state [*l'état populaire*]. But, as there are an infinity of kinds of monarchies, aristocracies and popular states, the question becomes so vague that it does not seem to make sense to even ask it' (my translation). Paul Vernière makes the point that Montesquieu rejects as illusory the search for the 'best regime' (P. Vernière, *Montesquieu et l'Esprit des Lois ou la raison impure* (Paris, 1977), p. 109).

⁴ Other problems, no less profound, include his deterministic notions of climatic and other physical determinants of man's behaviour, and his long sections on French feudalism, which provide a kind of lengthy afterword (say some) to the work. See Elie Carcassonne, *Montesquieu et le problème de la constitution française au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1927); Irene Cox, 'Montesquieu and the History of French Laws', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 218 (Oxford, 1983), pp. 1–201; Mark Hulliung, *Montesquieu and the Old Regime* (Berkeley, 1976); and Mark Hulliung, 'Montesquieu's Interpreters: a Polemical Essay', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, X (1981), pp. 327–45, all of whom argue convincingly for the importance of Montesquieu's theories of feudalism. On the other hand, see 'Jacob Vernet à Montesquieu', 24 juin 1748, and 29 juin 1748, *Correspondance*, Masson III, pp. 1119–20, where we learn that the sections on feudalism were added at the last moment at the insistence of Vernet, Montesquieu's editor. See Bernard Manin, 'Montesquieu et la politique moderne', *Montesquieu [Cahiers de philosophie politique]*, ed. Eisenmann et al. (Paris, 1985), p. 165; and Ellis, 'Montesquieu's Modern Politics', particularly pp. 668–72.

⁵ In *SL*, V.19, Montesquieu refers to England, where we find 'the republic hides under the form of a monarchy'. The problems surrounding Montesquieu's analysis of the English constitution concern the presentation of England in XI.6, where it receives a somewhat mechanistic treatment, and in XIX.27, where a discussion of factionalism and partisan politics dominates the presentation. Both presentations of England, contradictory in themselves, call into question Montesquieu's apparent admiration for the classical republic based on political virtue described in the first eight or so books.

⁶ See, for example, Catherine Larrère, 'Les typologies des gouvernements chez Montesquieu', *Etudes sur le XVIII^e siècle*, ed. Jean Ehrard (Clermont-Ferrand, 1979), pp. 87–103; Catherine Larrère, 'Montesquieu Républicain?', *Dix-Huitième siècle*, XXI (1989), pp. 149–62; Bernard Manin, 'Montesquieu et la politique moderne', pp. 157–229; Tzvetan Todorov, 'Réflexions sur les "Lettres Persanes" De

unresolved is the point at which Montesquieu became enamoured with moderate regimes. Without entering directly into this debate, I am proposing that an examination of the 'Tale of the Troglodytes' reveals that Montesquieu's interest in moderate government extends at least back to the time of the writing of the *Persian Letters*. Further, I want to suggest that Montesquieu was, in this tale, developing an idea which would become of profound importance to his *Spirit of the Laws*, and that is the question of participatory politics. In a word, the sequel to the 'Tale of the Troglodytes' suggests that the practice of commerce could, within the context of the moderate regime, teach citizens the skill of practical politics.

The 'Tale of the Troglodytes'

Montesquieu's most popular work was undoubtedly the *Persian Letters*.⁷ Published in 1721,⁸ the *Persian Letters* was an immediate success and was largely responsible for Montesquieu's acceptance into the social world of the Paris *littérati*, and his election to the French Academy.⁹ While Montesquieu was not the first to present letters from the Orient,¹⁰ his was certainly the most successful. Montesquieu wrote that after their appearance, book sellers would stop anyone they suspected of possessing a literary bent and implore, 'Sir, do some Persian Letters for me, I beg you'.¹¹

The 'Tale of the Troglodytes' appears in Letters 11 to 14. It is a response to a question by Usbek's correspondent, Mirza. Mirza describes a discussion he was having with the other courtiers Usbek has left behind. They were arguing about whether 'men are made happy by pleasure, and the satisfaction of the senses, or by the practice of virtue'. 'I have often heard you say', he continues, 'that men were

Montesquieu', *Romanic Review*, 74 (1983), pp. 306–15; Todorov, 'Droit Naturel et Formes de Gouvernement dans *L'Esprit des Lois*', *Esprit*, III (1983), pp. 35–48; Postigliola, 'En relisant de le chapitre sur la constitution d'Angleterre'; and Ellis, 'Montesquieu's Modern Politics'. For two excellent discussions of the controversies surrounding the interpretation of Montesquieu's works, see this latter reference and Hulliung, 'Montesquieu's Interpreters: a Polemical Essay'.

⁷ Although many of Montesquieu's readers today agree with Stark, who described it as 'nothing more than a piece of frivolity and a protracted joke' (Werner Stark, *Montesquieu; Pioneer of the Sociology of Knowledge* (Toronto, 1961), p. 7). A similar sentiment is expressed by Meyer, who cautions against using the *Persian Letters* as a statement of Montesquieu's political principles because of its frivolous nature (Paul Meyer, 'Politics and Morals in the Thought of Montesquieu', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 56 (1967), p. 852).

⁸ For a discussion of the problems in dating the *Persian Letters*, see Louis Desgraves, *Montesquieu* (Paris, 1986), pp. 103–4.

⁹ On Montesquieu's election to the French Academy, see Shackleton, *Montesquieu*, pp. 85–9; Louis Desgraves, 'Montesquieu et l'Académie française', *Revue historique de Bordeaux*, XVI (4e série, 1958–9), pp. 31–44; and Desgraves, *Montesquieu*, pp. 171–2.

¹⁰ See G.L. Van Roosbroeck, *Persian Letters Before Montesquieu* (New York, 1932); P. Martino, *L'Orient dans la littérature française* (Paris, 1906); and A. Behdad, 'The Eroticized Orient — Images of the Harem in Montesquieu and his Precursors', *Stanford French Review*, XIII (1989), pp. 109–26.

¹¹ 'Some Reflections on the Persian Letters', Betts, p. 283. See also *Pensées* # 2033, Masson II, p. 628.

born to be virtuous, and that justice is a quality which is as proper to them as existence.' Usbek's reply, quite simply, is that men are most happy when they practise virtue,¹² and he explains this truth by means of a fable about two communities. Each represents contrasting pictures of self-direction in a political community; each seems to correspond to a rival theory about the nature of man.

The first community displays man as being intrinsically selfish and, in Hobbesian fashion, seeking power after power. Populated by individuals who are unrepentantly rapacious, this regime seems to suggest that the unlimited pursuit of self-interest can lead only to continued anarchy and truly a state of war, all against all. It is obvious that this regime is untenable, and its simple portrayal does not seem to provide us with a solution; there is no Kantian city of devils here. What order existed came not from the checking of passions with interests, nor from the mutual check of competing ambition, but from the despotic control of a foreign prince. After overthrowing this prince, the Troglodytes contract amongst themselves a representative republic. But even this they find too restrictive, and they abandon all conceits of government, living each to himself. The benefits of society are now lost to these primitive men, and they continue to degenerate into increasing misery.

Remarkably, two Troglodytes avoid the corruption of their fellows, and leave this region to found a republic based upon perfected virtue. Like the community they left behind, this too will be based upon self-directed behaviour, only these Troglodytes, possessing virtue, will be restrained by their own knowledge of what is right and what constitutes proper behaviour in service to the community. In stark contrast to the anarchical regime they left behind, no conflict exists amongst the virtuous Troglodytes because all agree as to what each should do and what each should receive. This republic is utopian, with generosity and benevolence its overwhelming character. They are ruled by a simple maxim: 'While everyone is capable of doing good to one man, it is godlike to contribute to the happiness of an entire society'.¹³

Montesquieu's readers have generally agreed on what Montesquieu's purposes are with this fable. The first regime is meant to criticize the Hobbesian theory of man as intrinsically selfish; if men were as Hobbes says, then their ultimate fate would not be the election of an absolute sovereign, but their degeneration into anarchy. Montesquieu then contrasts this regime with a community based upon the idea that men are naturally virtuous; this latter regime, of course, prospers quite well. A.S. Crisafulli's 1943 article on the 'Tale of the Troglodytes' is considered by most of Montesquieu's readers as authoritative:

¹² As several of Montesquieu's readers have pointed out, the structure of this question and reply is no doubt an allusion to Glaucon's question to Socrates in the *Republic*. See Keohane, 'Virtuous Republics and Glorious Monarchies', p. 386.

¹³ Letter 89. Letter 89 recounts a conversation Usbek has with a 'man of sense'. After comparing French liberty with Persian despotism, the sensible man suggests that republics are superior to both. 'But it seems that the sanctuary of honour, reputation, and virtue is to be found in republics, and the lands where men can speak of "my country"'. In Rome, Athens, and Sparta, honour alone was the reward for the greatest of services. A wreath of oak-leaves or laurel, a statue or public congratulations, was an immense reward for winning a battle or capturing a town.'

The story of the Troglodytes is an allegory in which Montesquieu, refuting Hobbes' conception of the state of nature and the origin of society, shows that in the state of nature men were moral and virtuous since they were endowed with a natural sense of justice and were benevolent and kind in the sense that they sought primarily the public good and not their own. They remained in the state of nature until their natural virtue or goodness was affected by the emergence of the selfish side of their nature through the manifestation of ambition and the desires for wealth and luxury.¹⁴

There is much to be said for this interpretation. As Crisafulli and others have demonstrated, the language Montesquieu uses to describe the condition of the selfish Troglodytes is strikingly similar to that of Hobbes,¹⁵ and the utopic Troglodyte regime employs the language of classical republicanism,¹⁶ and that of those seventeenth-century writers who extolled the virtues of primitives.¹⁷ Montesquieu's message according to this interpretation would be that virtue is 'natural' to man, and man is by nature a seeker of justice.¹⁸ Hence it is possible to create a regime based not upon the premise that man is by nature selfish (such a regime would never survive) but on the premise that man is by nature virtuous. The 'Tale of the Troglodytes' is thus seen as an example of Montesquieu writing utopic political fiction.¹⁹

This interpretation is not, however, without its problems. We can begin with the idea that the first regime is meant to refute the Hobbesian conception of the natural state of man. Hobbes's theory has two parts. The first is what we might call Hobbes's psychological theory, in which he examines the nature of man free from the characteristics imposed upon him by society. Such a man is by nature individualistic, and cannot be expected to exhibit any form of altruism. Consequently, any

¹⁴ A.S. Crisafulli, 'Montesquieu's Story of the Troglodytes: Its Background, Meaning, and Significance', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America [PMLA]*, LVIII (1943), p. 391.

¹⁵ Crisafulli, 'Montesquieu's Story of the Troglodytes', pp. 374-5. See also Richter, *The Political Theory of Montesquieu*, pp. 31-50; and Keohane, 'Virtuous Republics and Glorious Monarchies', pp. 385-7.

¹⁶ Crisafulli cites Aristotle, Cicero and Shaftesbury in this context.

¹⁷ Especially Fénelon. See Crisafulli, 'Montesquieu's Story of the Troglodytes', pp. 375 ff., and Richter, *The Political Theory of Montesquieu*, pp. 36-8.

¹⁸ A more balanced interpretation is by M.H. Waddicor, *Montesquieu: Lettres Persanes* (London, 1977). The Troglodyte tale is discussed on pp. 43-5.

¹⁹ There is a debate amongst some of Montesquieu's readers as to whether the *Persian Letters* should be read as an example of literature, or as an exercise in political thought. Roger Caillois, for example, has been criticized by Sergio Cotta for what the latter terms the 'politisat' of the *Persian Letters*. See Caillois, preface to tome I of his edition of Montesquieu's *Oeuvres complètes* (*Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu*, ed. Roger Caillois, Vols. I and II (Paris, 1949-1951)). Cotta's criticism comes in his *Montesquieu e la scienza della società* (Turin, 1953). For discussion of the controversy see Corrado Rosso, *Montesquieu moraliste; des lois au bonheur*, traduit de l'italien par Marc Régaldou (Bordeaux, 1971), pp. 25 ff.

government formed would have to be based entirely upon his sense of his own interests, and not upon his benevolence to his fellow man.²⁰

The second part of the theory considers the type of government such individualistic men would need to create. Only an absolute sovereign, Hobbes argued, would be sufficient to overcome the individualism which would dictate the motivations of such men. Thus man would reasonably give up his rights to self-direction in favour of the protection of the absolute sovereign because he would recognize that such protection outweighed his interests in maintaining his right to determine his own behaviour.²¹

It is true that Montesquieu criticized Hobbes for attributing to man characteristics formed and created by society. This Montesquieu was to point out in several places in his writings,²² most notably in the *Spirit of the Laws*. In Book I, Montesquieu explains that Hobbes has confused the nature of man as he is within society with that of man as he would exist before society. Man is not naturally selfish; he learns to be so in society.²³ But Book I does not suggest that man is, therefore, virtuous in nature, and certainly does not suggest that anyone like the two virtuous Troglodytes corresponds to the image of man before society. While Montesquieu does argue that Man, prior to the creation of society, was not greedy, this is, he explains, because he was timid and continually frightened and would only lose this fear (and then become selfish) when society was formed and was then able to provide him with protection. Indeed, it is only with the creation of society that man can be thought of as virtuous; questions of morality, and this is Montesquieu's point, are social questions, and are applicable only to man in society. As Montesquieu has Usbek write in Letter 94, those who seek the state of nature are seeking mere fiction. 'If men did not form societies, if they separated and fled from each other, then we should have to inquire the reason for it, and try to find out why they lived apart from each other'.²⁴ But since they do form societies, it is to society that we should look for answers to our questions of justice.²⁵

²⁰ See R.S. Peters, 'Hobbes, Thomas', *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (8 vols., New York, 1968), Vol. IV, pp. 41-4; and C.B. Macpherson's 'Introduction' to the Pelican edition of the *Leviathan* (Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C.B. Macpherson (Harmondsworth, 1968)).

²¹ See Michael Levin, 'Social Contract', *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, Vol. IV, pp. 256-7.

²² *Pensées* # 1266, Masson II, pp. 341-6.

²³ 'Hobbes asks, *If men are not naturally in a state of war, why do they always carry arms and why do they have keys to lock their doors?* But one feels that what can happen to men only after the establishment of society, which induced them to find motives for attacking others and for defending themselves, is attributed to them before that establishment.' *SL*, I.2.

²⁴ This letter will be the basis for Montesquieu's argument in Book I.3 of *EL*.

²⁵ Montesquieu also criticized Hobbes for assuming that if such early men were to give up their rights to self-direction in favour of an absolute sovereign, this would thus justify absolute authority from that time forth. In an early entry in Montesquieu's *Pensées*, he writes: 'A principle that is very false is that of Hobbes: that, the people having authorized the prince, the actions of the prince are therefore the actions of the people, and, by consequence, the people cannot find fault with the prince, nor demand of him any account of his actions: because the people cannot complain against the people. In a like manner, Hobbes is obliged by his principle of natural law: *Pacta esse servanda*. The people has authorized the prince under condition;

Certainly Montesquieu is thinking of Hobbes with this part of the tale. But this does not suffice to explain Montesquieu's purposes here. If the 'Tale of the Troglodytes' is meant to be a refutation of Hobbes, which part of Hobbes's theory is Montesquieu refuting? It can be argued that Montesquieu was less concerned with the Hobbesian notion of natural man than with the type of rule this notion justifies.

The first Troglodyte regime was ruled by a foreign despotic prince who obtained his rule through conquest. We are not told what type of regime this despotism replaced, only that the foreign prince wished to correct 'la méchanceté de leur nature'.²⁶ We also know that the Troglodytes had no 'principles of equity or justice among them', and that following the overthrow of the foreign prince, the people 'ne consulta plus que son nature sauvage'.²⁷ While this seems to hint that they were savage and wicked by nature (it is not clear that these two words are synonymous),²⁸ Montesquieu is far from being unequivocal about this. Hence, the character of the Troglodytes presented here is already that of corrupted individuals. Indeed, these Troglodytes anticipate Montesquieu's description in the *Spirit of the Laws* of what happens to subjects living under despotism.²⁹ Montesquieu explains that citizens who live under a despotism will degenerate into a state of savagery, but in neither case does he suggest that this is a degeneration 'back' to some original state, for no original state is hypothesized.³⁰

it has established it under a convention. He must observe it, and the prince represents the people only as the people has wanted or is sensed to have wanted this representation. (And more, it is not true that that which is delegated has as much power as that which delegates and so no longer depends upon it.)' (*Pensées* # 224, Masson II, p. 94). Cf. *Persian Letters*, Letter 104: 'But if a ruler, so far from keeping his subjects happy, wants to tyrannize them or destroy them, the basis for obedience is lost; nothing unites them, nothing attaches them to him; and they go back to their natural liberty. They maintain that unlimited authority can never be legitimate, because it can never have a legitimate origin. For, they say, we cannot give someone else greater power over us than we have ourselves; we do not have limitless power over ourselves — for instance, we may not take our own lives; therefore nobody, they conclude, has such power.'

²⁶ Betts translates this as 'to reform their natural wickedness', while Richter suggests 'to correct their wicked nature'.

²⁷ Betts gives 'the nation let itself be ruled only by its natural wildness', while Richter gives 'the people consulted only the savage disposition natural to them'.

²⁸ See the translator's note in the Cambridge edition of *The Spirit of the Laws*, IV.viii (Montesquieu is speaking of the use of exercise to toughen citizens): 'Now, these exercises, so appropriate for making people harsh and savage [*sauvage*], needed to be tempered by others that might soften the mores.' The translator's note explains: 'The meaning in French of *sauvage* covers both the notion of the brutal and savage and that of the shy and wild; it means something asocial' (note 'j', p. 41).

²⁹ See *EL*, V.16.

³⁰ Indeed, not only is no original state of nature hypothesized, but neither does Montesquieu argue that there is a contractual basis for society itself. This point is made by Keohane, who argues that critics who see the tale as a refutation of Hobbes overlook the fact that the 'tale is almost precisely the mirror opposite of the social contract device in the work of such theorists as Hobbes and Locke, where the costs and benefits of the leaderless condition versus submission to authority are counted up, and each individual sees that he has most to gain by coming in on the new regime. In Montesquieu's fable the pattern is quite different: experience of authority, rejection of authority by mutual contract, and unrestrained individual pursuit of selfish interest.' (Keohane, 'Virtuous Republics and Glorious Monarchies', p. 387.)

Now, if it is Montesquieu's thesis that the Hobbesian interpretation of man is incorrect, what argument is he providing as criticism? It can only be that, if men were to exist like these Troglodytes, they would not have entered into a social contract and formed the kind of government that Hobbes suggests, but would have instead remained in increasing states of misery. This, however, is not so much a refutation of Hobbes's theory of the nature of man, but of his theory of what political solution was appropriate given such a nature of man. Surely neither Hobbes nor his followers would be dismayed by Montesquieu's depiction of the fate of the selfish Troglodytes, for it proves that without an absolute sovereign, the plight of man would be a war of all against all. After all, the regime degenerates into a state without government, having failed in attempting to create a republic. Hence it could just as easily be presented as a proof of the need for an absolute sovereign, one stronger than the foreign despot who was so easily removed.

A better interpretation is that the selfish Troglodyte regime is meant to be a refutation of the 'Mandevillian'³¹ thesis of self-interest producing order. There is no order when self-interest is given free reign. This is an interpretation many of Montesquieu's readers accept,³² but it is unsatisfactory if its incompatibility with the idea that Montesquieu was refuting Hobbes is not explained. If it is a criticism of the Mandevillian theory of order through competing self-interest, then the point of the selfish Troglodyte regime is not to demonstrate man's true nature, but to criticize the theory that such self-interest, when left alone, produces order. It is a criticism, then, not of the theory of man's nature, but of the proposed political solution showing how that nature can be controlled. As such, it is again more easily seen as proof of Hobbes's theory of an absolute sovereign, rather than a rejection. If man is greedy by nature, then do we, as Hobbes says, need an absolute sovereign, or will society, as Mandeville says, produce its own order through the mutual check of ambition? Montesquieu could just as easily, by this tale, accept the former. If, on the other hand, Montesquieu is rejecting the theory that man is selfish by nature, and thereby rejecting Hobbes, then the Mandevillian question need not be raised, for it is irrelevant to ask whether competing selfish interests (that do not exist) will produce order. Montesquieu could be criticizing Hobbes, or Mandeville, but surely not both, at least not with this tale.

The second assumption that needs re-examining is the idea that the virtuous Troglodyte regime demonstrates man's inherent virtue. This presents us with several problems. On what basis is man presented as virtuous by nature? It is not claimed that Usbek believes man was born virtuous, but rather that man is born *to be* virtuous ('les hommes étoient nés pour être vertueux'). Secondly, only two Troglodytes

escaped the corruption of the previous regime, and we are given no evidence that this is because they were 'true' men, that is that they, unlike the countless others, represented the true picture of natural man. We cannot, of course, dismiss the fact that these two Troglodytes have learnt from experience the evils of rapacious selfishness (as Usbek himself is learning throughout the *Persian Letters*), but this is not the point. The question is not whether or not the virtuous Troglodyte city may, by chance, have occurred, but whether or not such a city can provide a model for politics and society. In other words, their very anomalous nature undermines the claim that the virtuous Troglodyte city can serve as a model for modern society and the two virtuous Troglodytes must then be regarded as flukes of nature. Thirdly, the virtuous Troglodyte regime is notoriously unable to rely upon this natural virtue, for it must employ every authoritative feature at its disposal, including religion, mythology and art, in order to maintain the preconceptions of virtue upon which it relies. In Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* he refers to the tremendous lengths republics must go to in order to educate their citizens to behave virtuously.³³ Similarly, we are told that religion, festivals, folk songs recited at family meals every day, indeed every aspect of the Troglodytes' customs was designed to instill the proper feelings of selflessness and citizenship.³⁴

The virtuous regime does not remain forever, in fact it is soon replaced by a monarchy in which a wise King rules, albeit reluctantly. Usbek tells us that the community became too large, a contradiction of an earlier statement that the increasing size of the community merely strengthened virtue with its 'greater number of examples'.³⁵ In any case, the citizens of the virtuous republic tire of the demands of policing themselves. Perhaps, although Montesquieu does not say so directly, they also tire of never being sure their decisions are correct, produced because they wish to uphold justice rather than avoid conflict. Consider the reactions of the good Troglodytes when they are robbed. While Usbek tells us they are capable of valiantly defending their regime from foreign attack, this seems to be the only time they are certain they can take such actions. At all other times, *when they are behaving individually*, they defer to their transgressor, even to the point of wishing the thief a better use of their possessions than they had. They soon decide they need a king, so that wise laws, understandable and requiring only obedience, can replace the burden of self-directed virtue. The reluctant king admonishes his citizens for their desire by reminding them that they are in effect abandoning virtue for an imitation of it.

You would prefer to be subject of a king, and obey his laws, which would be less rigid than your own customs. You know that you would then be able to satisfy your ambitions, accumulate wealth, and live idly in degrading luxury;

³¹ Although I caution that, if so, this represents a rather simplistic understanding of Mandeville. See Thomas Horne, *The Social Thought of Bernard Mandeville: Virtue and Commerce in Early Eighteenth Century England* (New York, 1978); J.A.W. Gunn, *Beyond Liberty and Property*, Ch. III, 'Mandeville: Poverty, Luxury, and the Whig Theory of Government' (Kingston, Ontario, 1983); and M.M. Goldsmith, *Private Vices, Public Benefits: Bernard Mandeville's Social and Political Thought* (Cambridge, 1985).

³² See Keohane, 'Virtuous Republics and Glorious Monarchies', p. 390; and Richter, *The Political Theory of Montesquieu*, pp. 31 ff.

³³ *EL*, IV.5, V.2, V.4. See Larrère, 'Les typologies des gouvernements chez Montesquieu', *passim*, and Ellis, 'Montesquieu's Modern Politics', p. 691, for discussions of the extremist aspects of Montesquieu's democratic republics.

³⁴ Judith Shklar's insightful comment about the virtuous Troglodyte city is worth repeating: 'Nothing seems to fail like republican success.' J. Shklar, *Montesquieu* (Oxford, 1987), p. 38.

³⁵ Letter 12.

that, provided you avoided falling into the worst crimes, you would have no need of virtue.³⁶

The king's fears are well founded, for in an unpublished sequel³⁷ to this tale, the republic undergoes a further change when commerce is introduced. The Troglodytes are asked 'Do you now want to have wealth rather than your virtue?' To this the citizens reply that they would have to make such a choice only if they wished to make wealth and its acquisition a 'foundation' for the regime. But if virtue remained the 'principle',³⁸ then commerce could exist without necessarily damaging virtue. The king reminds them that if they are rich he will have to be richer, in order to maintain the prestige of his authority, and this will lead to sumptuousness of the court, not to mention taxation. The burden will be on the king then, reply the Troglodytes, to ensure that his example does not corrupt their desires. 'Oh Troglodytes!' the King concludes, 'there could be a noble bond between us; if you are virtuous, so shall I be; if I am virtuous, so will you be.'³⁹

Why did Montesquieu write this sequel, and why was it not published? As it stands, it seems to undermine the validity of the thesis that virtue is necessary to happiness. First we are told, in the conclusion to the tale as it was published, that self-directed virtue was extraordinarily difficult to maintain, and the regime of wise laws would replace the regime based on virtue. Now we are told in the unpublished sequel that as long as they remained virtuous, these citizens could enjoy the fruits of commerce, as long as acquisitiveness did not predominate over the desire for virtue. Crisafulli argues that Montesquieu meant to 'modify his primitivistic and idealistic attitude and to soften the pessimism it implied with regard to the existence of virtue or goodness beyond the state of nature'.⁴⁰ Similarly, Keohane sees it as Montesquieu's realistic recognition that utopias cannot last, and need to be replaced by more practical regimes. 'The sequel suggests that anarchy is not the only condition under which virtue can be attained, but that it can also accompany life under wise political authority.'⁴¹ Both agree that this sequel is an important link to the *Spirit of the Laws*. Indeed, with this sequel the 'Tale of the Troglodytes' provides a simple structure for the political theory of the *Spirit of the Laws* itself, for it presents us with first a state of nature, followed by a discussion of republics and their basic virtue, then monarchies with wise laws, and completed by the commercial regime. This corresponds in a crude way to Book I, Books II and III and, finally, the discussion of England in XI and XIX. But why, although Montesquieu supervised the revised edition of the *Persian Letters*, did he still refuse to add this letter?

³⁶ Letter 14.

³⁷ It is, of course, printed in most editions of the *Persian Letters*, including Melvin Richter's selections, pp. 120–2, and in Betts, pp. 286–7. See note 1.

³⁸ cf. *EL*, III.1. Montesquieu does not use this term, but it seems clear that this is what he is referring to.

³⁹ Letter '3' in Betts' appendix, p. 286.

⁴⁰ Crisafulli, 'Montesquieu's Story of the Troglodytes', p. 389.

⁴¹ Keohane, 'Virtuous Republics and Glorious Monarchies', p. 387.

Melvin Richter suggests that Montesquieu was concerned with the conclusions that he had reached, a position not compatible with the ideals of virtue he had presented in the utopic Troglodyte republic. 'His decision not to print the sequel to the myth of the Troglodytes in the corrected edition of the *Persian Letters* may be due to the fact that for once Montesquieu detected a logical inconsistency.'⁴² It is the nature of this inconsistency that must occupy us now.

In the regime of the wise king,⁴³ the Troglodytes are told that they desire to be ruled by laws because they are tired of the heavy burden of being virtuous 'despite themselves'. Laws, less rigid than their own customs, would allow selfish activity, but would maintain order by providing standards of behaviour that would not require the knowledge virtue demands; indeed, this regime would be moderate in its requirements, in contrast to the extremism necessary in the perfectly virtuous regime. This moderate regime is in fact described as having 'no need of virtue'.⁴⁴ Now, if this regime precedes the regime based on commerce, as the tale indicates, then the claim of the Troglodytes that they could enjoy commerce as long as their 'foundation' remained that of virtue, and was not replaced by commerce, becomes highly suspect. As some of Montesquieu's readers, particularly Keohane, have noted, the two cities that succeed the virtuous republic seem to indicate that Montesquieu recognizes that the regime based entirely upon self-directed virtue is not the only regime that can foster good citizenship. But this recognition must mean that the regime based upon commerce, while quite capable of producing good (if wealthy) citizens, does *not* have virtue as its foundation. So the argument presented by the acquisitive Troglodytes to their king is based upon a false premise. It argues that commerce can be acceptable as long as it is incidental, and not part of the nature of the regime. But virtue is no longer the 'foundation' or, as Montesquieu will later say, the 'principle' of the regime, and as a consequence their optimism that they will remain true to the classical ideals is unfounded.

Montesquieu chose not to publish the final sequel for reasons that will probably always be known only to him. But this sequel itself suggests a reason why he may have so decided. Perhaps it was not the apparent unresolved contradiction that caused him to suppress this letter, but his belief that the implication of this letter (that moderation may well be preferable to virtue) demanded of him a more substantial piece of work, which would eventually be the *Spirit of the Laws*.⁴⁵ The implications of this letter involve the nature of politics and authority. Consider the tale of the Troglodytes as a discussion of two parallel regimes, each based upon self-directed

⁴² Richter, *The Political Theory of Montesquieu*, p. 44.

⁴³ Letter 14.

⁴⁴ There is some question as to whether the regime of the wise king, or the regime based on commerce, produces virtuous citizens or citizens who merely mimic virtue. Keohane suggests that virtue is 'attained' in the commercial city described in the sequel; I would argue that only its effect, but not virtue itself, was found there. Indeed, this may have been the source of Montesquieu's concern about the nature of the commercial republic. See Keohane, 'Virtuous Republics and Glorious Monarchies', p. 387.

⁴⁵ Moderation is, nevertheless, a constant theme throughout his early writings; see, for example, his 'Discours sur Cicéron' and 'De la Politique'.

behaviour, that is, each designed to allow individuals to pursue their own desires to their fullest extent. This ability to pursue one's own desires to the fullest extent is a definition of liberty. But the ability to so pursue one's own desires is hampered by the conflict this produces, and hence the lack of security this produces frustrates these very desires.⁴⁶ Only in certain types of regimes, then, is it possible to pursue desires and not have this pursuit ultimately destructive and self-defeating. Mandeville may have claimed that selfish interests can balance each other and produce harmony, but in the 'Fable of the Bees' this takes place not in a state of nature, nor in the aftermath of an overturned despotism, but in the confines of a hive, that is, a vibrant, active political community. Similarly, Montesquieu is arguing that pursuit of selfish interest presumes the existence of a community, and it is his task in the 'Tale of the Troglodytes' to ask what type of community allows for such pursuits.

It is clear that the regime which will allow individuals to pursue selfish interests cannot be like the first Troglodyte republic. But this regime was the poisoned aftermath of an overturned despotism, the result of which was the loss of any connection between citizens, and the loss of any ability of these primitive men to learn why they would prosper were they to cooperate; they did not live in a Ciceronian 'commonwealth'. The virtuous republic seems at first glance to better serve the needs and interests of the Troglodytes, as it is based upon the premise that each citizen can know perfectly what constitutes proper behaviour, and govern himself accordingly. But this premise is wrong, for as the state increases in size, the ability of the citizens to do this diminishes. As more people become a part of the regime, conflict between interests and needs becomes inevitable, and it becomes impossible to avoid coming into conflict with one another.

Notice that Montesquieu does not offer as a solution the division of the community into smaller regimes.⁴⁷ The point here seems to be that eventually all communities must face the fact that they cannot exist in harmony unless they are willing to accept that conflict must exist, and that selflessness by itself is not a solution to conflict. What is needed are not more Troglodytes who merely acquiesce when their property is stolen, but Troglodytes who are willing to engage and participate in politics.

⁴⁶ Montesquieu's definitions of liberty found in *EL* are controversial and have served to confuse rather than elucidate. However, two important elements of his definitions of liberty are, first that the citizen have the power to fulfil his role as a citizen (defined differently depending upon the regime), and second that he feel secure and believe his liberty is protected. '[L]a liberté ne peut consister qu'à pouvoir faire ce que l'on doit vouloir, et à n'être point contraint de faire ce que l'on ne doit pas vouloir . . . La liberté est le droit de faire tout ce que les lois permettent; et si un citoyen pouvoit faire ce qu'elles défendent, il n'auroit plus de liberté, parce que les autres auroient tous de même ce pouvoir.' (*EL*, XI.3) 'La liberté politique dans un citoyen est cette tranquillité d'esprit qui provient de l'opinion que chacun a de sa sûreté; et pour qu'on ait cette liberté, il faut que le gouvernement soit tel qu'un citoyen ne puisse pas craindre un autre citoyen.' (*EL*, XI.6).

⁴⁷ As he does in *EL*, IX.1. See Christopher Wolfe, 'The Confederate Republic in Montesquieu', *Polity*, IX (Summer 1977), pp. 427-45; and Ralph Nelson, 'The Federal Idea in French Political Thought', *Publius*, V, 3 (1975), pp. 7-62.

It is this willingness to engage in politics which is absent in the virtuous republic. It is also a quality absent in Usbek⁴⁸ himself. Usbek has left the Persian court for fear he will become corrupt, yet in so doing he has left his seraglio in danger, and the ultimate fate of his regime is to degenerate into cruel and corrupted absolutism. Usbek learns the importance of politics during his travels but, tragically, learns it too late to save his seraglio and save Roxana. What he learns is that politics suggests not perfected knowledge, but moderation.⁴⁹

Perhaps this can be seen if we consider Letters 9 and 14. These letters come immediately before and after the Troglodyte sequence and may be thought of as providing a counterpoint to the story of the virtuous cave dwellers. Remember that while Usbek is pontificating about the wonders of the virtuous state, order in his seraglio, left in the hands of the eunuchs, is slowly being destroyed. Both letters are written by the First Eunuch; the first to a slave, the second to another eunuch, both of whom have accompanied Usbek. In these letters, the First Eunuch considers the basis of his authority and his lifelong struggle to escape from the tyranny of his own passions. But though he may believe he has overcome his human nature, in fact he has become something of a beast, a cruel and perverted ruler, monstrous in both his physical aspects and in his manner of ruling.⁵⁰

Now, the rule described by Usbek based entirely upon virtue is the product of a fantasy. The rule described by the First Eunuch is the actual rule that is taking place in Usbek's seraglio. In both cases there is an attempt to suppress human nature, and in both cases there is an assumption that human nature is something to be overcome or even transcended. Hence the First Eunuch describes his induction into the ranks of the eunuchs as a process by which he was separated from his very self,⁵¹ and similarly describes the castration of Jahrum as the latter's 'elevation'. 'It seemed to me as if you had been born for a second time, leaving a state of slavery in which you would always have to obey and entering one in which you could command.'⁵²

⁴⁸ Montesquieu's readers are fond of referring to Usbek as, for example, 'Usbek de la Brède' — Barrière has even suggested Usbek was meant to be an autobiographical figure [cited in Betts, p. 304] — with the assumption that Usbek always represents Montesquieu's thoughts. This is a dangerous assumption to make, and while he may well generally speak for the author, he does not always. Usbek, it must be remembered, is learning throughout his journey, and the 'Tale of the Troglodytes' is told before he has had much of an opportunity to become enlightened. See H.D. Weinbrot for a discussion of the debate concerning how much validity we are to place in the words of the eighteenth-century Persona; 'Masked Men and Satire and Pope; Toward a Historical Basis for the Eighteenth-Century Persona', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, XVI (Spring 1983), p. 265-89.

⁴⁹ For an account of Usbek's growth and development in the *Persian Letters*, see Frederick M. Keener, *The Chain of Becoming* (New York, 1983), especially pp. 158 ff.

⁵⁰ The end of the seraglio sequence (and the end of the *Persian Letters*) is, of course, the death by suicide of Roxana; she, and she alone, finds victory, not by suppressing her human nature, but by celebrating it: 'I may have lived in servitude, but I have always been free. I have amended your laws according to the laws of nature, and my mind has always remained independent.' (Letter 161).

⁵¹ Letter 14. 'I anticipated that I should be freed from the onset of love by my powerlessness to satisfy it. But alas! the effects of my passions were eliminated, but not their cause.'

⁵² Literally this refers to the fact that, for the most part, slaves were chosen to become eunuchs; only in such a condition could they be trusted with their master's wives. See Letters 41-3.

But surely such freedom is an illusion. The First Eunuch rules not through his own authority, but through that of Usbek. As he himself explains, this means that his relationship with the wives under his control is a constant 'ebb and flow of authority and submission'.⁵³ Although he believes himself to have been 'born to command over them', his position as their master is most precarious, for he must serve their every whim. 'On such occasions [i.e. when he is asked to serve them]', he explains, 'blind obedience and unlimited indulgence are essential; a refusal, from the lips of a man like myself, would be unheard of; and if I hesitated to obey, they would have the right to punish me. I would rather lose my life . . . than submit to that humiliation.'⁵⁴

In Letter 80 Usbek tries to determine which type of government 'is most in conformity with reason', whether a government which exercises harsh (but correct) rule is better than a moderate regime. Given the type of rule exercised in the seraglio his answer must be seen as ironic, for Usbek explains that the regime which best suits the needs of the people is the best regime, 'the most perfect is the one which attains its purpose with the least trouble, so that the one which controls men in the manner best adapted to their inclinations and desires is the most perfect'. Indeed, justice itself is defined as 'a relation of suitability'.⁵⁵ As he explains, to found a regime based upon assumptions of perfected virtue is to assume a uniformity of ideas which does not exist:

Justice is a relation of suitability, which actually exists between two things . . . It is true that men do not see these relationships all the time. Often, indeed, when they do see them, they turn away from them, and what they see best is always their self-interest. Justice raises its voice, but has difficulty in making itself heard amongst the tumult of the passions. Men are capable of unjust actions because it is in their interest to do them, and they prefer their own satisfaction to that of others. They always act with reference to themselves — no one is gratuitously wicked; there must always be a determinant reason, and this reason is always the reason of self-interest.⁵⁶

The regime which will be most in conformity with reason will also be most in conformity with the ruling principles of the world, natural law,⁵⁷ which is in turn most in conformity not with some mysterious ethereal wisdom, but with a true understanding of man, and this will be the regime best able to embody justice.⁵⁸

⁵³ Letter 14.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Letter 83. 'un rapport de convenance'. Compare *EL*, I.1: 'Les lois . . . sont les rapports nécessaires'.

⁵⁶ Letter 83.

⁵⁷ The existence of natural law is acknowledged throughout the *Persian Letters*. See esp. Letters 48, 75, 83, 94, 129, 136, 161. See Tzvetan Todorov, 'Reflexions sur les "Lettres Persanes" de Montesquieu', p. 312.

⁵⁸ In Letter 89, Usbek describes the 'instinct for self-conservation' as man's true basic nature. Montesquieu would agree.

Justice is indeed eternal,⁵⁹ but it is questionable whether knowledge of this justice is possible through pure reflection.⁶⁰ Indeed, Usbek introduced his tale by explaining that truth does not belong to the 'realm of thought alone'.⁶¹ Instead, justice must be embodied in a regime, in the manner in which it determines relations amongst men, in the manner in which it allows individuals to pursue selfish desires. Usbek has left Persia because his own toleration has led him to wonder about other cultures. He wonders about other religions and other ideas, and is puzzled beyond belief by the extremism and fanaticism he finds in Europe, where horrific punishments are enacted over disagreements about the merest trifle.⁶² Montesquieu's unpublished sequel gave this answer to the question of what type of regime would avoid this extremism. It would be one based upon commerce, because this in turn rested on a desire basic to all men, and it depended upon sociable relationships to succeed. But Montesquieu had not yet determined exactly how this regime would do this, and what role virtue would play. There is, as Richter has pointed out, a tension between the regimes based upon law and commerce, and the virtuous republic, but Montesquieu's suggestion that a regime could embody both was less an example of contradiction on his part than an example of the direction his thought would take. His concern would now be to understand how a commercial regime could nevertheless retain an ability to produce good citizenship.

Montesquieu would find the answer to this question in England. Yet, although Montesquieu's readers are correct in arguing that the picture of England in the *Persian Letters* shows Montesquieu's lack of sophistication in understanding the dynamics of the English constitution,⁶³ it is also clear that this regime interests him very much. In Letter 80, where Usbek ponders which type of regime is most in

⁵⁹ Letter 83.

⁶⁰ Letter 97. See also Letter 68, in which judges determine guilt through contending arguments rather than through an appeal to absolute standards and, more important, Letter 129 in which Montesquieu discusses the (in)abilities of legislators to create perfect regimes. Montesquieu's readers have assumed that the existence of natural law, and its applicability to the laws of men, is uncontroversial in the *Persian Letters*. But like the *Spirit of the Laws*, its existence is not given as proof that it can be used, for that would suggest a reason which was angelic in its perfection. See Letter 83. See also Mark H. Waddicor, *Montesquieu's Theory of Natural Law* (The Hague, 1971), p. 15, note 65; Richter, 'An Introduction to Montesquieu's "An Essay on the Causes that May Affect Men's Minds and Characters"', *Political Theory*, IV (May, 1976), p. 133; and Jean Ehrard, *L'Ideé de nature en France dans la première moitié du XVIII^e siècle* (Geneva, 1981 [1963]), II, p. 726.

⁶¹ See also Letter 61, where it is argued that truth can only be determined through the inquiry of a 'troubled mind', that is, someone aware of the many contrary arguments, and not by those who claim perfected knowledge. See Franz Neumann, 'Introduction', *Spirit of the Laws* (New York, 1949) p. xii. Merry is correct when he writes: 'In other words, eternal truth is largely beyond the ordinary man's reason, and Montesquieu leaves us with the dilemma of absolute knowledge being unknowable to most men and knowable sense experience being relative in character.' (H.J. Merry, *Montesquieu's System of Natural Government* (West Lafayette, 1970), p. 13.)

⁶² Letters 29 and 46. See Todorov, 'Réflexions sur les Lettres Persanes', especially p. 310.

⁶³ Arguments that Montesquieu wrote books II to VIII of the *Spirit of the Laws* before his voyage to England in 1729 are made on the basis that the description of England there resembles that of the *Persian Letters*. For discussion, see Charles Dédéyan, *Montesquieu et l'Angleterre* (Paris, 1958), Ch. 2; 'L'Angleterre dans Les Lettres Persanes'.

conformity with reason, England is described, indirectly, as the most republican and the one possessing the most freedom, when compared to Holland and Venice.⁶⁴ In Letter 102, England is described as the most powerful state in Europe and, finally, in Letter 117, Protestant countries, which include England, are described as having commerce, which 'brings everything to life'. The answer to the problem posed by Usbek, then, is not the creation of a regime based upon virtue, but one based upon commerce. The answer to the puzzle of why Montesquieu chose not to publish the sequel is that he had yet to determine exactly what sort of regime this would be. That would require not a book of political fables but the *Spirit of the Laws*, and it is to this work that we must now direct our attention.

England and *The Spirit of the Laws*

The sections of the *Spirit of the Laws* concerning England are found primarily in Book XI.6 and Book XIX.27 and, as I explained at the beginning of this paper, have long been a puzzle to Montesquieu's readers, emerging as the crux of the modern debate on Montesquieu's work.⁶⁵ One reason *The Spirit of the Laws* has been criticized for internal inconsistency is that Montesquieu's praise of republican virtues seems to be at odds with his description of England as the moderate nation of commerce and partisan politics. Montesquieu's description suggests an atomization of English society where few were friends and where commerce and the desire for profit were a citizen's prime motivation.⁶⁶ Further, since his early works, such as the *Persian Letters*, seem to praise the virtuous republic, it has been argued that the first eight or so books of the *Spirit of the Laws* must have been written while Montesquieu was still under the spell of his classical education, and written, as Shackleton suggests, in the 'peace of his library'.⁶⁷ However, as I have tried to show, in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* the role played by commerce is far more complex,

⁶⁴ Usbek repeats an argument, common in Montesquieu's time, which Montesquieu would refer to again in the *Spirit of the Laws* by explaining the error upon which such an argument is based. Usbek is complaining that republics do not command obedience any better than do despotisms such as Turkey or Persia. 'I do not see that public order, justice, and equity are better preserved in Turkey, or Persia, or under the Mogul, than in the republics of Holland, Venice, or even England.'

⁶⁵ The extent to which this has occurred is perhaps best demonstrated with a negative example: M.P. Masterson has written an article entitled 'Montesquieu's Grand Design: the Political Sociology of l'Esprit des Lois' (*British Journal of Political Science*, II (July, 1972), pp. 283-318) which he describes as an answer to the need for an examination of Montesquieu *aside* from his interpretation of the English constitution. See also Ellis, 'Montesquieu's Modern Politics', pp. 665, 689-90.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Montesquieu's *Pensées* # 1253, Masson II, p. 334: '[In Rome], Citizens were attached to other citizens through many different types of bonds: . . . Today, all is abolished, even paternal power: each man is isolated.'

⁶⁷ 'The majesty of the Roman or Athenian republics, seen through the works of Xenophon, Thucydides, Livy or Cicero, provided a stark contrast to the character of French society at the time of Dubos . . . For Montesquieu the republic was a thing of the past; monarchy — so near to despotism — was a thing of the present. In 1728, however, in Italy, he learns of the actual republics and his ideal is completely dissolved. The republican liberty of Venice earns his contempt; Verona has no more virtue than Venice. He adopts finally a general condemnation of all the republics of the peninsula.' (Robert Shackleton, 'La Genèse de L'Esprit des lois', *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* (1952), p. 432 (my translation).)

and it is not readily apparent that Montesquieu, in the *Persian Letters*, accepted the classical republic as the regime of preference. Let us consider now Montesquieu's analysis of commerce as found in the *Spirit of the Laws*, and see whether this analysis of the sequel to the 'Tale of the Troglodytes', in which Montesquieu presents the regime based upon commerce, can help us to understand his attitude towards commerce in *The Spirit of the Laws*.

In *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu argues that commerce poses a danger to the integrity of the classical republic. The reason commerce in a republic is ultimately corrupting is because the very desire to pursue commercial activities constitutes a failure of the republic to convince its citizens to be virtuous, or to consider the welfare of the republic ahead of that of the self.⁶⁸ The commercial individual, unapologetically absorbed in private affairs, could not be trusted to support the needs of the state;⁶⁹ citizenship called at the very least for unselfishness.⁷⁰ 'When virtue ceases, ambition enters those hearts that can admit it, and avarice enters them all'.⁷¹ In a republic, such an alteration of the principle of the regime leads to its corruption. The attitude towards the citizen who is *not* acquisitive becomes perverse; it is he who is labelled avaricious as the normal values become reversed.

Desires change their objects: that which one used to love, one loves no longer. One was free under the laws, one wants to be free against them. Each citizen is like a slave who has escaped from his master's house. What was a *maxim* is now called *severity*; what was a *rule* is now called a *constraint* [*gêne*]; what was *vigilance* is now called *fear*. There, frugality, not the desire to possess, is avarice. III.3.⁷²

Shackleton's choice of the image of the peaceful library to describe the influence of Montesquieu's classical education on the *Spirit of the Laws* is ironic, given the following passage from the *Persian Letters*, published in 1721. Rica is describing his visit to the library of a learned friend, and it is clear that it was not peace and tranquillity that Montesquieu found in his library, but the basis for his theory of political liberty as arising from conflict and discord: 'Here are the historians of England, where you see freedom constantly arising from the flames of discord and sedition, and the sovereign perched unsteadily on an unshakable throne; a restive nation, wise even in fury, mistress of the seas (a thing without precedent), and combining trade with empire.' *Persian Letters*, Letter 136. See Neal Wood, 'The Value of Asocial Sociability: Contributions of Machiavelli, Sidney, and Montesquieu' [*Machiavelli and the Nature of Political Thought*, Martin Fleisher, ed. (New York, 1972)], pp. 300-7, on the importance of this passage. It is also worth noting that Montesquieu's library contained many classic works on England, including those of Rapin De Thoyras and Ralph Cudworth. See Louis Desgraves, *Catalogue de la bibliothèque de Montesquieu* (Genève, 1954); and Desgraves, *Montesquieu*, p. 234.

⁶⁸ 'One can define this virtue as love of the laws and the homeland. This love, requiring a continuous preference of the public interest over one's own, produces all the individual virtues; they are only that preference. This love is singularly connected with democracies. In them alone, government is entrusted to each citizen.' *SL*, IV.5.

⁶⁹ J.G.A. Pocock, 'The Mobility of Property', in *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 110.

⁷⁰ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Indiana, 1981), p. 220.

⁷¹ *SL*, III.3.

⁷² *Ibid.* (original emphasis).

What was once considered greed is now lauded; what was once frugality is now thought of as greed. Wealth, formerly considered as a resource to be shared in common inheritance, is now thought of in terms of private ownership, as each individual tries to accumulate as much as he can. But note that each citizen does so privately, not publicly; commerce, in a republic, leads to private lives and in no sense teaches its commercial classes to participate in politics. 'Formerly the goods of individuals made up the public treasury; the public treasury has now become the patrimony of individuals. The republic is a cast-off husk, and its strength is no more than the power of a few citizens and the license of all.'⁷³ This was why virtue was so crucial to democracy; it required active participation in rule by its citizens. In a democracy, commerce works contrary to this. It convinces them to avoid politics. Those citizens who thought of the laws as the source of their very freedom are now finding them constraining. Rather than possessing a harmony of intention and duty, they now find the two opposed. They are like slaves fleeing their master's home; they are not, then, political creatures participating in rule. The result of this corruption is that the structure of government remains, but its nature has been altered.⁷⁴

But commerce does not seem to corrupt England or, more exactly, the corruption that commerce invariably produces does not seem to have the same effects in England as it would in a republic. Indeed, the advantages seem to outweigh the disadvantages. In the *Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu explains that the fruitfulness of the soil is an important factor in determining behaviour. In very fruitful countries, people who make their living from the soil, 'the people in the countryside [*les gens de la campagne*], who are the great part of the people, are not very careful of their liberty; they are too busy and too full of their individual matters of business'.⁷⁵ They do not have a direct interest in the questions of politics, and so liberty is of no great concern to them; instead, they wish for stability. But this criticism does not apply, explains Montesquieu, to the English commercial ranks.⁷⁶ In England, it is precisely they who are the prime movers of politics; they seem, he writes, actually to thrive on becoming involved in political controversy, and so lend their commercial talents to the political process. This is the basic difference between England and Rome. The knowledge of the reasons for their source of wealth the 'gens médiocres' thus acquire becomes in itself a type of political knowledge, and provides the basis for their unique form of political skill.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ In a well known, and oft quoted, passage Cicero described Rome in similar terms: 'For it is by our defects of character and not by accident that we long since lost the substance of the commonwealth, though we still retain its name.' Cicero, *On the Commonwealth*, V.i. This passage comes to us from St. Augustine *de civ. dei*, 2. 21.

⁷⁵ *SL*, XVIII.1.

⁷⁶ See Montesquieu's letter to Domville, *Pensées*, # 1960, *Masson II*, pp. 593-5. I treat this little essay at greater length in 'Montesquieu, Commerce and Participatory Democracy', paper delivered at the Atlantic Meeting of the Conference for the Study of Political Thought, Halifax, 1991.

In *SL*, XIX.27, Montesquieu begins by explaining that 'I have spoken in Book XI of a free people, and I have given the principles of their constitution'.⁷⁷ Every citizen has 'his own will and . . . value[s] his independence according to his taste'. With such an independent will, they tend to choose sides, and see this division of powers as a means of gaining favour by supporting the efforts of one against the other. The executive power, with its powers of patronage, can 'furnish great expectations but not fears, all those who would obtain something from it would be inclined to move to that side, and it could be attacked by all those who could expect nothing from it'. Passions are given 'free rein'. They are checked, not by oppressive laws, but by other passions, 'hatred, envy, jealousy, and the ardor for enriching and distinguishing oneself'. But in so doing, they invigorate the state and give it life. Indeed, 'if this were otherwise, the state would be like a man who, laid low by disease, has no passions because he has no strength'.

Political parties, because of the fickleness of the electorate, are maintained in a constant balance of power. Montesquieu describes the English voter as one led by 'caprices and fantasies' and who 'often changes parties'. Political controversy becomes a part of daily political life; the people are always uneasy (agitated) which keeps the political parties responsible.⁷⁸ The system Montesquieu describes is one in which civil dissension, the kind that would challenge the sovereignty of the state and possibly result in civil war, is replaced by competition between political parties.⁷⁹ Enjoying security as a result, they are able to have a liberty which allows 'each . . . to say what he thinks . . . [A] citizen in this state will say or write everything that the laws [have] not expressly prohibited him from saying or writing'.⁸⁰ It depends upon passion rather than reason, but passion has always produced a stronger effect upon a people's mind than does reason.⁸¹ Its citizens have an economic interest in the vitality of the state; they are its biggest creditors,⁸² and have both confidence in its

⁷⁷ i.e. England. There has been some speculation as to why Montesquieu uses such a round about way to identify England as the subject of this chapter, but suggestions that this was meant to conceal some shocking truth seem to be far-fetched. Did Montesquieu really believe his censors so naïve that they would avoid checking back to see what regime was described in Book XI?

⁷⁸ One important difference between England and Rome is the fact that the people in England do not exercise their power directly. 'This is the great advantage such a government [has] over the ancient democracies, in which the people had an immediate power; for, when the orators agitated [*l'agitoient*] them, these agitations always had their effect.' (XIX.27). This is not the case in England, where the worst that happens are 'empty clamors and insults'. In fact, these often have a good effect, as the people regain an interest that has flagged.

⁷⁹ See Manicas, 'Montesquieu and the Eighteenth Century Vision of the State', p. 335.

⁸⁰ cf. Montesquieu's 'An Essay on the Causes that May Affect Men's Minds and Characters', ed. and trans. Melvin Richter, *Political Theory*, IV (1976), p. 152: 'The great liberty of saying everything and writing everything which exists in certain countries creates there a great number of eccentric minds.'

⁸¹ *SL*, XIX.27. It is important to remember that Montesquieu does not see passions as being very plentiful in England, and therefore not so dangerous a basis for rule as they would be in Rome. Compare Cicero's *On Duties*, Lxliii: 'My view, therefore, is that those duties are closer to nature which depend upon the social instinct than those which depend upon knowledge.'

⁸² cf. Pocock, 'Modes of Political and Historical Time', in *Virtue, Commerce, and History*, pp. 97 ff.

financial future and an interest in ensuring that it stays healthy. Its soil is satisfactory,⁸³ and so it does not need to conquer foreign lands. More important, the vitality of the soil means that 'no citizen . . . depend[s] on another, each . . . make[s] more of his liberty than of the glory of a few citizens, or of a single one'. Honours do not come easily and the citizen is valued more highly than the soldier. Citizens are valued because of their commercial achievements, so there is an incentive for all to prosper. But more is at stake than the achievement of honour; citizens require commerce to succeed as trade is the basis for their economy.

This is the secret of their success; they have become a 'trading people', and so as a 'commercial nation' they have an 'extraordinary number of small private interests'. These private interests are the source of the motivation of the citizen to seek to preserve his state. Men in England are esteemed for 'real qualities',⁸⁴ and then only two: wealth and personal merit.⁸⁵ But frivolity and politeness are not valued, so that 'even luxury is solid, founded not on the refinement of vanity but on real needs'. Every individual is busy pursuing his private interests, having no time for polish. They have, says Montesquieu, 'more intelligence than taste'. This is the type of participation they enjoy; their politics is not one of perfect decisions, but one of choosing between competing interests. Not even religion can harm their ability to choose reasonably: 'every citizen of this state has freedom of choice, and therefore is guided either by his own knowledge or by fantasies'. Everyone, says Montesquieu, is 'sovereignly indifferent to religion'.⁸⁶ He has already explained that passion, not reason, determines behaviour. Now he elaborates:

In a free nation it often does not matter whether individuals reason well or badly; it suffices that they reason; from that comes the liberty which protects them from the effects of these same reasonings.⁸⁷

The essence of this regime, then, is that it convinces its citizens to think for themselves. It is not important that they think correctly, for the regime is not based upon the principle that such perfected reason was possible, nor predicated upon the assumption that only proper reason would serve the state. Instead, it produces citizens who consider and deliberate, but over matters over which they have a passionate concern. This is why Montesquieu says that in England it does not matter whether they reason correctly, only that they reason at all.

⁸³ *SL*, XIX.27.

⁸⁴ Unlike monarchies, in which false qualities are valued. See *EL*, III.7. In Montesquieu's *Pensées*, he wrote: 'If I were to be asked what prejudices they [the English] have, I would, truth to tell, be at loss what to say: neither war, nor birth, nor dignity, nor the men who have succeeded in life nor a mad preoccupation with ministerial favour. They wish men to be men.' (*Pensées* # 767, Masson II, pp. 228.)

⁸⁵ *SL*, XIX.27.

⁸⁶ In his *Notes sur l'Angleterre*, Montesquieu writes, 'there is no religion in England'. In the House of Commons, at prayer time, only four or five members ever bother to attend. 'If one speaks of religion, everyone laughs'. Nevertheless, there is 'no nation which has more need of religion than England, for those who are not afraid of being hanged ought at least be afraid of being damned'. (Masson III, p. 292.)

⁸⁷ *SL*, XIX.27.

But what really matters is that moderate citizens inhabit a moderate regime, for it is only in such a regime that such a modest claim for citizen participation is possible. Montesquieu has told us that '[p]olitical liberty exists *only* in those governments where power is moderated',⁸⁸ and, elsewhere, '[t]he spirit of commerce brings with it that of frugality, economy, moderation, work, discretion, tranquillity, order and rule'.⁸⁹ But to create a moderate government, such that it allows for the use of commerce as a means of learning political skill, and is able to withstand competition and conflict (and indeed thrives upon it), requires great genius. It is, Montesquieu writes, 'a masterpiece of legislation, rarely produced by chance, and which one hardly dares to leave to prudence'.⁹⁰ Clearly, it is a moderate government which will require the most political skill to accomplish.⁹¹ Moderate governments require that powers be restrained, balanced and tempered. As Keohane writes: 'Moderate polities depend upon intricate patterns of mutually supportive tensions, and are not to be tampered with in the misguided hope of making them more commodious'.⁹² The essence of this skill is to give citizens the opportunity to understand the nature of their own regime; what they have to know in order to determine their behaviour should be a practical knowledge achievable through the participation in competitive politics. What they have to know will be, Montesquieu argues, taught by commerce.⁹³

An examination of Montesquieu's writings on virtue, liberty and commerce, demonstrates the complexity and entanglement of these ideas as they existed in the eighteenth century. Montesquieu argued that commerce did not necessarily lead to the abandonment of politics and that it could, in a properly constructed regime, lead to its very encouragement. The properly constructed regime could accomplish precisely what the hopeful Troglodytes wished for; a regime based upon commerce which did not abandon virtue.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, XI.4.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, V. 6. See also XXIX.1: 'I say it, and it seems to me that I have written this work only to prove it: the spirit of moderation should be that of the legislator; the political good, like the moral good, is always found between two limits.' See Keohane, 'Virtuous Republics and Glorious Monarchies', p. 387; and Ellis, 'Montesquieu's Modern Politics', p. 693.

⁹⁰ *SL*, V.14. See Keohane, 'Virtuous Republics and Glorious Monarchies', p. 391. See also *Pensées* # 892, Masson II, p. 259. The original text reads: 'Pour former un gouvernement modéré, il faut combiner les puissances, les régler, les tempérer, les faire agir; donner, pour ainsi dire, un lest à l'une, pour la mettre en état de résister à une autre; c'est un chef-d'oeuvre de législation, que le hasard fait rarement, & que rarement on laisse faire à la prudence.'

⁹¹ See *Pensées* #'s 831, 892, 918, Masson II, pp. 244, 258, 263.

⁹² Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France*, p. 398.

⁹³ 'Those Greek *politiques* who lived under a popular government knew of no other force to sustain it than virtue. Those [*politiques*] of today speak to us only of manufacture, commerce, finances, riches, and even luxuries.' (*SL*, III.3, my translation.) This is a controversial and difficult passage, and it has received considerable attention from Montesquieu's readers, who have debated what Montesquieu meant, and how it should be translated into English. See Keohane, 'The President's English', for the controversy surrounding this passage, pp. 360-1, 385.

My point is this. Montesquieu's analysis of the relationship between commerce and politics suggested, not that commerce allowed for the abandonment of virtue in place of unthinking selfish activity,⁹⁴ but that virtue itself may not be based upon reason anyway; virtue was, after all, the product of a passion.⁹⁵ As a consequence, Montesquieu's advocacy of the commercial regime as a suitable replacement for the virtuous republic with its impossible demands, was not a call for the abandonment of all attempts at producing a regime based on reason and its replacement with *unthinking* commercial activity, but for a regime which allowed for and encouraged *participation* in politics. As long as citizens could be convinced to participate in political activity, to take sides in political contests, to vote, to play the political games of elections, then, in the properly constructed regime, the demands of virtue could be avoided and replaced with calculated political activity. But such activity would be reasonable; not employing perfected reason but employing calculation, a moderate form of reason. This is why Montesquieu says (and I repeat) that in England, 'it often matters little whether individuals reason well or badly, so long as they reason at all. For this is the source of that liberty which protects them against the effects of their reasoning'.⁹⁶

Commerce in Montesquieu's analysis of the English constitution is not quite an activity of the private self. Instead it is a means by which citizens can be convinced to participate in political affairs. The advantage of modern commercial enterprise is that it has changed the nature of the regime; there is a new order amongst the citizens. This order, based upon commercial activity, is comprehensible, because it is based upon the idea that individuals naturally desire acquisitions. Since a commercial regime possesses a relationship amongst its citizens which is comprehensible, it offers the attractive opportunity of allowing citizens to consider the consequences of their actions in their effect on the community as a whole. What convinces them to want to do this (as opposed to merely being able to do this) is that, in England at least, the people possess a share of the sovereign power of the regime; by participating in the election of the House of Commons they were able to obtain the fruits of patronage. By having frequent elections, by having competition amongst rival candidates and factions, by preventing any one branch of government from abusing its positions (through a balance of powers), this participation in patronage would not have the same corrupting effects it would have in a regime requiring virtue. There was indeed a 'noble bond', but it was not between the king and his acquisitive subjects, but between the practice of commerce and the participation in politics.

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⁹⁴ Pocock describes the world of commercial enterprise as Circe's island: '... marriage to this enchantress [commercial society] means that we must live in a world of magic and transformation; and the price to be paid is admission that we are governed by our fantasies and passions. Cato explains at length that men are governed by passion, not principle'. J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment; Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1975), p. 471.

⁹⁵ *SL*, XIX.27.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

PARIS AND PATRIOTISM

Robert Shaver*

Paris and Patriotism

In 1771, Rousseau was asked to write a constitution for Poland. He replied with *The Government of Poland*. It is his last political work. At one point he describes the sort of Pole he hopes to produce: his 'love of the fatherland . . . makes up his entire existence: he has eyes only for the fatherland, lives only for his fatherland; the moment he is alone, he is a mere cipher; the moment he has no fatherland, he is no more; if not dead, he is worse-off than if he were dead'.¹ On the face of it, this looks more like the description of a problem than any solution. I will explain how the mad patriotism of the *Government of Poland* is indeed a solution. I will treat it as a response to the general modern problem of 'life in others' that Rousseau found endemic to big cities such as Paris, and which he has Saint-Preux detail in his letters from Paris to Julie in Book II of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*.² I begin with a short account of life in others, follow this with an account of how patriotism solves this problem, and conclude with an attempt to make Rousseau's patriotism less frightening, more necessary, and slightly more possible than it seems at first glance.

The Problem

The problem of life in others is a commonplace among the *moralistes*. Montaigne observes that we 'live with reference to others' in that '[w]e do not care so much what we are in ourselves and in reality as what we are in the public mind. Even the joys of the mind, and wisdom, appear fruitless to us, if they . . . do not shine forth to the sight and approbation of others'.³ Pascal notes that '[w]e are not satisfied with the life we have in ourselves and our own being. We want to lead an imaginary life

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¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Government of Poland*, trans. Willmoore Kendall (Indianapolis, 1985), p. 19.

² Saint-Preux, wanting to 'know man', writes that 'I am in the midst of others, surrounded by multitudes in the same place, from which I shall begin to judge the true effects of society. For if men are constantly made better by their association, then the more numerous and closely connected they are, the better they ought to be, and morals, for example, should be purer in Paris than in the Valais . . . It is not Parisians that I study, but the inhabitants of a great city.' (Rousseau, *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. B. Gagnebin and M. Raymond (Paris, 1959-69), ii, pp. 242-3. For Rousseau's Paris, see Marshall Berman, *The Politics of Authenticity* (New York, 1972), pp. 113-19, 139-44.)

³ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. D.M. Frame (Stanford, 1958), p. 729.