Montesquieu on Empire and Enlightenment

Michael Mosher
(University of Tulsa)

1./ Introduction to the Argument

This essay works its way through various texts in order finally to consider, with the proper degree of incredulity, the striking reflections Montesquieu offers in Book X, Chapter 4 of the *Spirit of the Laws*, which rehearses the "advantages" that accrue to "conquered peoples," primary among them being the possibility of extending enlightenment to them. This is a surprising conclusion to find in the work of an otherwise fiercely anti-colonialist philosopher whose standard anti-imperial argument is that colonization weakens or destroys the colonized and it weakens or destroys the colonizers. Whether one regards the characters in the *Persian Letters*, the Rome of the *Considerations*, or the "Reflections on Universal Monarchy in Europe," one finds a continuous thread of anti-imperial and anti-colonial argument. It would appear that Montesquieu cannot find any safe or legitimate road to empire in modern times.

Nevertheless, his argument in "Motives that Encourage Us in the Sciences" backfires into an at least potential justification for imperial conquest, or so Edmund Burke later concludes. In addition, there are three other noteworthy exceptions. These loopholes exploit (1) the security needs that might safely lead to territorial expansion, (2) the possibility of "human rights" interventions in other nations—a view that exists in tension with the strain of cultural pluralism in Montesquieu—and (3) the main argument, following *Laws* X, 4: the justification of external conquest on the grounds that no other road exists to save a people from their rulers: "A conquest can destroy harmful prejudices, and if I dare speak in this way, put a nation under a better genius." Conquest promotes enlightenment. Machiavelli merely issues calls to revolutionary re-foundings from within a corrupted state. Montesquieu makes it an argument for external conquest.

More striking than these large exceptions is the admiration that Montesquieu has for that ancient warrior, Alexander the Great. Montesquieu goes out of his way to lavish praise on Alexander's occupation policies, which imposed on the victorious the duty to shift from "knowing" to "acknowledging" those they had defeated. Alexander also illustrates the potential for an alliance between the warrior and the merchant. Alexander constituted an ancient precedent of what was coming together in eighteenth century Europe: an enlightenment-inspired alliance of conquerors and agents of commerce (the "empire of the sea") that justified its actions as Montesquieu says Alexander did, in wanting "to conquer all in order to preserve all."

If one were to ask, however, which forms of government, monarchies or republics, does Montesquieu believe are best suited for the tasks of the modern world, one would find apparently inconsistent answers, depending on the topic under discussion. Republics are most suited to governing the empire of *doux commerce*, but republics do not seem especially apt for modern political and economic conditions. The latter part of the essay explores this textual dissonance, which includes considerable detail concerning the internal character of monarchy.

England is the special case, "the republic [that] hides under the form of monarchy." If readers are persuaded that in monarchy Montesquieu has depicted, as he imagines he has, a self-correcting political system attuned to all the differences that make modern Europe distinct from antiquity, they will also appreciate the element of danger that Montesquieu re-introduces into this otherwise autonomously self-correcting system by refashioning it with republican practices. The ghost of republican equality haunts the social hierarchies of the English monarchy. This combination renders England potentially unstable and even dangerous, despite its liberties. It also puts in question its colonial practices, which Montesquieu was inclined to praise.

The one empire to which Montesquieu (along with Kant) could give full throated approval was the federation of enlightened European states which create "one nation" based on trade. But on this issue his published remarks mask the private misgivings that he reveals in his notebooks in which the warrior enlightenment of an Alexander seems to hang over every extension in global commerce,

> "Europe, which makes the commerce of the three other parts of the world, is the tyrant of these three parts. France, England, and Holland, which have made the commerce of Europe, are the three tyrants of Europe and of the world," (*Pensée* 568).

2./ Analytical Summary of the Argument

(I) The Worth of Empire

This essay may be taken as an series of reflections on Book X, Chapter 4 of the *Spirit of the Laws* in which Montesquieu appears to rehearse "some advantages" that may accrue to "conquered peoples," primary among them being the possibility of extending enlightenment to them. This is, to say the least, an odd position given the reputation of Montesquieu as a fiercely anti-colonialist philosopher, but does empire have a worth on these grounds, "the widening of mental horizons," as Jawaharlal Nehru once put it?

(II) Montesquieu's Preliminary Understanding of Empire

The prestige of empire is ostensibly the last thing on Montesquieu's mind. For him, despotisms are almost always empires as both are the most typical form of rule in large territories. Montesquieu's epistolary novel *Lettres persanes* already exhibits the territorial logic of despotic empire that is made more explicit in the *Laws*.

(III) "Oriental" and Tropical Despotisms

Empire has for Montesquieu an Asian face in the lands of the East or it has the look of the South ("le Midi") where one finds peoples oppressed by a tropical climate, but Montesquieu never excludes any region of the world from despotism.

(IV) Anti-Colonialism in the *Lettres persanes*

As early as his novel the *Persian Letters*, Montesquieu argues (Letter 121) that colonization weakens or destroys the colonized and it weakens or destroys the colonizer. From the point of view of victims, one need attend only to the "cruelty" and "barbarism" of imperial conquest.

(V) Descartes in Mexico

The "Discourse on the Motives that Must Encourage Us in the Sciences" offers a further example of these anti-colonialist sentiments. Montesquieu invites the reader to imagine that Descartes had somehow gone to Mexico before the arrival of the Spanish invaders. That is to say, he asks what if European scientific ideas preceded European arms? For Montesquieu, the implications of the new science would have taught the Indians the radical equality of all beings and subsequently given them courage in the face of those better armed. But this is a double-edged sword. Were the Amer-Indians to cultivate the sharp edges of enlightenment science, they could slay their European enemies. But given that the Mexicans continued to abide by their "prejudices," i.e. their culture, the other side of this proffered sword just might cut the way for a justification of a new kind of invasion, one that would elevate peoples bereft of "light" to enlightenment. Edmund Burke argues against this ideological justification for British interference in India and cites Montesquieu as a source for this erroneous understanding.

(VI) Women Against Empire

The *Persian Letters* is a source for imperial imagery. Usbek's effort to rule from afar indicts him as out of touch despot even as he presents himself as enlightenment philosopher. His wife Roxanne, the great heroine of the *Persian Letters*, is a French subject in rebellion against overbearing kingship, a Christian woman tortured by convent life, and a Persian princess revolting against the court/harem of her husband. She is above all a figure of resistance to empire, established by her husband Usbek's effort to govern from a vast distance. Montesquieu's typology of government is intertwined with this figure

(VII) Rome: "Republican Project for Invading Al Nations"

The Rome of the *Considérations* follows Machiavelli's narrative, but without much taste for Roman means and with no taste for the outcome. Cruelty marks the spirit of the Romans from beginning to end. Such is for the *philosophe* the prestige of empire. We can see written all over the *Considérations* the *bon mot* that Montesquieu waits until *The Spirit of Laws* to deliver: "We have begun to be cured of Machiavellianism, and we will continue to be cured of it" (*Laws*, XXI, 20)

(VIII) The Cost of Modern Empire

In section VII, I take issue with my colleague Paul Rahe in our respective interpretations of "Reflections on Universal Monarchy in Europe," which concern Montesquieu's claims regarding the intentions behind and outcome of the War of Spanish Succession. Against the idea that Montesquieu thinks Louis XIV a danger to Europe instead of just a menace to the French themselves, we may point to the main thesis of the "Reflections," namely, that European empire is now impossible. War, Montesquieu supposes, has become less significant in European affairs. There has been a change in "the law of peoples" and, by its standards, Roman conquests were barbarous.

Montesquieu would appear to conclude that there is no safe or legitimate road to empire in modern times, but he may have left room for exceptions. Sections IX-XI explore three such loopholes, which are concerned with (1) security and monarchical expansion, (2) human rights interventions, and (3) the main argument, following Laws X, 4: invasions that may confer advantages on a conquered people through the spread of enlightenment.

(IX) First Loophole: Territorial Limits and the Empire of Security

States are restricted by internal limits that under threat of undesirable constitutional changes should curb expansion. What, however, does one say about a republic or a monarchy that has not yet reached the limits of its appropriate territorial rule? Provided that it has a right to go to war, the warning against an expansionary policy that distorted internal political arrangements would simply not apply Furthermore, Montesquieu supposes, where there is a right to go to war, there is necessarily a limited right as well to temporary territorial conquest. Otherwise the conquering nation would never have a duty to undo the mischief it has caused.

(X) Second Loophole: Human Rights

For Montesquieu, Gelon the king of ancient Syracuse makes "the finest peace treaty mentioned in history." It is exceptional because it demands only that the Carthaginians "abolish the custom of sacrificing their children," We should not be altogether surprised to find in the great anti-imperial thinker cases that point to military intervention on something like the grounds of human rights and, more particularly, on grounds of a duty to promote enlightenment, because the very basis for Montesquieu's opposition to imperial conquest stems from his concern with both human rights and with the eradication of prejudice through enlightenment. The question is raised whether this assertion of a universal duty is inconsistent with Montesquieu's proclaimed cultural pluralism.

(XI) Third Loophole: The Empire of Enlightenment

Earlier we showed how for Montesquieu human rights violations prepare the way for external conquests. Now Montesquieu pushes to the far bolder claim. "A conquest can destroy harmful prejudices, and if I dare speak in this way, put a nation under a better genius." A certain sort of conquest promotes enlightenment. Montesquieu may go further than his Florentine predecessor. Machiavelli issued a call to a revolutionary re-

founding from within a corrupted state. Montesquieu takes the language of internal reform and makes it an argument for external conquest.

(XII) Alexander's Manner of Conquering: Model for Modernity?

One would suspect that the story of Alexander the Great's pillage in Asia Minor and India would arouse anti-colonial indignation in Montesquieu to the same degree it was aroused by the story of Spain in the Americas. But instead Montesquieu views Alexander as a paragon of virtue in conquest. Alexander's occupation policies made him stand out. To put it anachronistically, Alexander governed as a multiculturalist. These policies also allowed Alexander to shift the ground of his standing with the conquered Asians. He acknowledged their existence and position, not as an object of knowledge, but as a form of subjectivity in confrontation with his own subjectivity. Alexander is man out of his times, a figure from cruel antiquity, who nevertheless points the way to modernity

(XIII) War and Commerce: Allies or Foes?

Alexander serves as an ancient model to modernity not only because he practiced the politics of mutual acknowledgment, but because he illustrates the potential for an alliance between the warrior and the merchant. Alexander's voyage down the Indus River became a voyage of enlightenment that intimated an East and West united, not by conquest, but by commerce and trade. Commerce may have been *doux* in consequence but not in origin. Hard and rationally enlightened conquest preceded soft and rationally enlightened trade. Alexander constituted an ancient precedent of what was coming together in eighteenth century Europe: an enlightenment-inspired alliance of conquerors and agents of commerce. The exceptional character of Alexander's empire-building lay, Montesquieu says, in his wanting "to conquer all in order to preserve all." Conquest for preservation establishes a benchmark for legitimate acquisition that is applied, fairly or not, by Alexander's modern successors who sit astride those "empires of trade and liberty" that arise in seventeenth and eighteenth century England and Holland

(XIV) The Empire of Doux Commerce: For Republics, Not Monarchies?

This new international regime led to three questions for Montesquieu. His answer to each question tends in the direction of reversing the arguments rehearsed in the above discussion regarding how warriors prepare the way for commercial exploits. These arguments distinguish Montesquieu from many other authors who thought empire was a worthy monarchical project and a fitting task for its honor driven inhabitants. For Montesquieu, "Colonies are best suited to republican states." By contrast, monarchs are rotten colonizers. Readers could be forgiven, however, if they suffer from cognitive dissonance in contemplating this image of the peaceable republic, for in large parts of Montesquieu's work, the republic is far from a peaceable regime. It is instead filled with impoverished warriors bent on predation, but what then are we to make of those rapturous interludes where the author speaks of purely commercial potential of the republic?

(XV) Modern Times: For Monarchies, Not Republics?

The promotion of the republic as the agent of modern colonization and international commerce flies in the face of all the interpretive arguments that may be drawn from the *Spirit of the Laws* which tend to indicate why republics are not suitable regimes for modern conditions. First there is the political problem that prohibits republics from expanding without undesirable changes, but this restriction makes it difficult for them to compete in a world of large European states. Federalism was a hope, but not one that Montesquieu much developed. Republics are also apparently restricted to a certain kind of commerce, which is not the kind of commerce likely to prevail on a prosperous continent. These issues are illustrated in Michael Sonenscher's analysis of the inability of the Roman republic to transform itself into a monarchy. But to appreciate the force of these sentiments, we need to take a detour that explains in more depth the precise character of Montesquieu's model of monarchy. In particular we focus on the issues of "honor" and social hierarchy.

(XVI) The English Monarchy's Volatile Republican Character

England is a special case for Montesquieu, "the republic [that] hides under the form of monarchy." Above we rehearsed the formidable features of Montesquieu's scheme for monarchy in order to show how it might have been regarded as the fittest candidate for being the regime of modern times. If readers are persuaded that Montesquieu has depicted, as he imagines he has, a self-correcting political system attuned to all the differences that make modern Europe distinct from antiquity, they will also appreciate the element of danger that Montesquieu re-introduces into this otherwise autonomously self-correcting system by refashioning it with republican practices. For Montesquieu, the capacity of monarchy to resist what the government may "examine" requires a social order whose locally rooted prerogatives make it seem immune to public scrutiny. That is to say, the key to monarchical stability lies not within the government, but in the famous "intermediary bodies" that exist independently in society. The political safeguards that Montesquieu thinks are required in a system of representative government are the existence of social orders, like the landed nobility, capable of resisting easy politicization. What is distinctive, however, about eighteenth century England is that, like the French nobility forty years later, the standing of the English nobility had already been politicized. The ramparts of resistance to public examination of its role were already breeched in the seventeenth century Civil War. The ghost of republican equality haunts the social hierarchies of the English monarchy. Based on his reading of the events of the English Civil War, Montesquieu fears that the same fate could overtake England in the eighteenth century.

(XVII) English Colonies

The above section shows why Montesquieu could have regarded England as a republic. We now draw the conclusion that when the author speaks of the republican manner of conquest or when he claims in his notes that "Colonies are best suited to republican states," he has in mind England as the paramount example of a modern state seeking the republican equivalent of empire while avoiding its traps. Montesquieu does not regard the English speaking colonies in North America as conquests. They do not constitute an empire. Ireland is unequivocally an English

conquest, but on the whole, the baron de la Brède seems determined to find more good than the bad in the English treatment of the Irish.

(XVIII) European Federation as Empire

At the heart of "Reflections on Universal Monarchy," Montesquieu's brief to the Europeans against military empire, is a plea for the establishment of the one empire to which Montesquieu could give full throated approval But it is not so much an empire, Montesquieu says, as a federation which creates "one nation" based on trade. His best example was the ancient "empire of the sea." England and its North American colonies is the preeminent modern example, although significantly he resists using the term empire to describe it. Through its federated structure, global commerce is an empire whose institutional framework might avoid, upon Montesquieu's understanding, the political despotism into which other empires have fallen. These happy prospects are belied by the grimmer view one finds in his notebooks:

> "*Europe*, which makes the commerce of the three other parts of the world, *is the tyrant of these three parts*. *France, England, and Holland*, which have made the commerce of Europe, *are the three tyrants of Europe and of the world*," (*Pensée* 568, my emphasis).

Even in the published argument, Montesquieu leaves traces of these concerns about the role of domination in international commercial dealings. Montesquieu may have sought to hide from the reader the shadow of the warrior enlightenment of an Alexander that hangs over the extension of global commerce, but his writing on *doux commerce* reveals in its own way the abiding presence of this figure.

3./ Biography of Michael Mosher

Born and raised in the state of North Dakota (USA), more specifically in Fargo (and therefore no friend to the Coen Brothers), Michael Mosher graduated from the University of California at Berkeley and took a Ph.D in political science at Harvard University (dissertation: "The Spirit That Governs Cities: The Modes of Human Association" 1976 —supervisors Judith Shklar and Michael Walzer). Mosher is currently professor and chair in the political science department at the University of Tulsa, he teaches the history of political thought and as well the contemporary politics of Europe and Japan. His studies on the major thinkers (Montesquieu, Burke, Rousseau, Hegel) and his research on contemporary ethical problems, for instance, the "subject" to which theories of justice are addressed, have appeared in the *American Political Science Review*, *Political Studies*, and *Political Theory*. In collaboration with David Carrithers and Paul Rahe, he published *Montesquieu's Science of Politics* in 2001. Professor Mosher has been a research associate at Wesleyan University (1994), a Fulbright professor at the University of Tokyo (1995-1996) and a visiting professor at Yale University (1995, 1999-200), as well as a member of the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study (1998-99). Most recently he has been a research visitor at the Centre d'Études et de la Recherche Internationale (CERI) at Sciences-Po, Paris.

4./ Selected Publications of Michael Mosher

"What Montesquieu Taught—'Perfection does not Concern Men or Things Universally,'" in *Modernity in Question: Montesquieu and His Legacy*, ed. Rebecca Kingston, (SUNY Press, forthcoming 2009)

"Free Trade, Free Speech, and Free Love: Montesquieu and The Reform of the Monarchy in France, 1748-1771" in Hans Blom, John Christian Laursen and Luisa Simonutti (eds.), *Monarchisms in the Age of Enlightenment: Liberty, Patriotism, and the Common Good*, eds., (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2007), pp. 101-118.

"Montesquieu on Conquest: Three Cartesian Heroes and Five Good Enough Empires," *Revue Montesquieu*, No° 8, 2006.

"Monarchy's Paradox: Honor in the Face of Sovereign Power', in David Carrithers and Paul Rahe (eds.), *Montesquieu's Science of Politics: Essays on the Spirit of Laws*, with (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), pp. 159-229.

"On the Originality of Francois Furet: A Commemorative Note," *Political Theory*, 26 (1998), 392-96
Download article

"Machiavellian Politics and Japanese Ideals: The Enigma of Japanese Power-Eight Years Later," Occasional Paper No. 10, *JPRI Papers*, ed. Chalmers Johnson, Japan Policy Research Institute, January 1998
http://www.jpri.org/publications/occasionalpapers/op10.html

"The Judgmental Gaze of European Women: Gender, Sexuality, and the Critique of Republican Rule," *Political Theory*, 22 (1994), 25-44
Download article

Review of Arthur Meltzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau's Thought*, *Journal of Politics*, 54 (1992), 299-303
Download article

"The Particulars of a Universal Politics: Hegel's Adaptation of Montesquieu's Typology," *American Political Science Review*, 78 (1984), 179-188
Download article