

From: Alan Macfarlane, **The Riddle of the Modern World: Of Liberty, Wealth and Equality** (Macmillan, London, 2000).

LIBERTY AND DESPOTISM.

Montesquieu's central pre-occupation was how to maintain liberty and avoid despotism. He was aware from his own experience that liberty was very fragile; Louis XIV had come close to extinguishing it, the Inquisition would do so if it could. Three quarters of the globe, he thought, suffered from absolutist regimes. Only in Europe had a certain degree of liberty arisen and been preserved. But even here, there was no reason why it should not be extinguished, as in the late history of Rome. His fears are well summarized in the following passage. 'Most of the European nations are still governed by the principles of morality. But if from a long abuse of power or the fury of conquest, despotic sway should prevail to a certain degree, neither morals nor climate would be able to withstand its baleful influence: and then human nature would be exposed, for some time at least, even in this beautiful part of the world, to the insults with which she has been abused in the other three.'¹

The 'long abuse of power' was a recognition of Acton's maxim that 'power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.'² Montesquieu warned that the 'human mind feels such an exquisite pleasure in the exercise of power; even those who are lovers of virtue are so excessively fond of themselves that there is no man so happy as not still to have reason to mistrust his honest intentions.'³ This was connected to his idea of balance. Something which started as good, balanced and conducive to human happiness and liberty could easily be perverted and swing to a dangerous extreme. For example, if there was no equality between people, democracy was impossible. But if things swung too far the other way, he saw as great a danger. 'The principle of democracy is corrupted not only when the spirit of equality is extinct, but likewise when they fall into a spirit of extreme equality, and when each citizen would fain be upon a level with those whom he has chosen to command him.'⁴

Judith Shklar has emphasized Montesquieu's realization of the fragility of liberty. The period of balanced republican liberty, as in Rome, cannot last long. 'The very qualities that make a people prosperous and happy cannot survive in a wealthy and contented society. Nothing seems to fail like republican success.'⁵ Thus the 'greatest problem of republic regimes is to put off the evil moment when they lose their inner balance.'⁶ Even the freest and most balanced polity he could see, England, would

¹Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 115

²Acton, **Life of Creighton**, I, 372

³Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 149

⁴Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 109

⁵Shklar, **Montesquieu**, 38

⁶Shklar, **Montesquieu**, 78

succumb. 'As all human things have an end, the state we are speaking of will lose its liberty...It will perish when all the legislative power shall be more corrupt than the executive.'⁷ France was even more in danger. 'What he dreaded was the descent of French absolutism into a despotism on the Spanish model.'⁸ Indeed '...the entire **ancien regime** was at risk...France was structurally inclined towards despotism.'⁹ This is a theme also picked up by Shackleton. He writes that 'Without vigilance, oriental tyranny might one day govern France. Servitude, says Montesquieu, begins with sleep.'¹⁰ The reason for this is relatively simple. For 'most people are governed by despotism, because any other form of government, any moderate government, necessitates exceedingly careful management and planning, with the most thorough balancing and regulating of political power. Despotism on the other hand, is uniform and simple. Passions alone are required to establish it...'¹¹

Montesquieu summarized this inevitable tendency from republic, through monarchy, to despotism, and how the equilibrium cannot be maintained. 'Most European governments are monarchical, or rather are called so; for I do not know whether there ever was a government truly monarchical; at least they cannot have continued very long in their original purity. It is a state in which might is right, and which degenerates always into a despotism or a republic. Authority can never be equally divided between the people and the prince; it is too difficult to maintain an equilibrium; power must diminish on one side while it increases on the other; but the advantage is usually with the prince, as he commands the army.'¹²

Control over the army became an increasing threat as technology developed. In particular, Montesquieu noted that the use of gunpowder had further tipped the balance towards despotism. He wrote, 'You know that since the invention of gunpowder no place is impregnable; that is to say...that there is no longer upon the earth a refuge from injustice and violence.'¹³ And likewise, 'the invention of bombs alone has deprived all the nations of Europe of freedom' by increasing the need for the centralization of military power.¹⁴

⁷Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 161-2

⁸Shklar, **Montesquieu**, 81

⁹Shklar, **Montesquieu**, 85

¹⁰Shackleton, **Montesquieu**, 272

¹¹Shackleton, **Montesquieu**, 271

¹²Montesquieu, **Persian Letters**, no. 103

¹³Montesquieu, **Persian Letters**, no. 106

¹⁴ Montesquieu, **Persian Letters**, no.106

Liberty could also be lost in the 'the fury of conquest'. Montesquieu was aware of two sorts of risk. One was that a country which might have developed internal balance and wealth would be over-run by the 'fury' of conquest by another. He noted how the wealthy civilizations of the Middle East had been 'laid waste by the Tartars, and are still infested by this destructive nation.'¹⁵ Particular danger lay in being part of a continent, not having naturally defensible borders, and being wealthy. His own country of France was a prime example, even when compared to Germany. For 'the Kingdom of Germany was not laid waste and annihilated, as it were, like that of France, by that particular kind of war with which it had been harassed by the Normans and Saracens. There were less riches in Germany, fewer cities to plunder, less extent of coast to scour, more marshes to get over, more forest to penetrate.'¹⁶ Germany's forests and marshes afforded it partial protection, and hence buffered its liberty.

Mountainous regions, such as Switzerland had even greater advantages. Firstly, they were poor areas which were not worth attacking, for 'in mountainous districts, as they have but little, they may preserve what they have. The liberty they enjoy, or, in other words, the government they are under, is the only blessing worthy of their defence. It reigns, therefore, more in mountainous and rugged countries than in those which nature seems to have most favoured.'¹⁷ Moderate, non-absolutist, governments were characteristic of mountain areas. 'The mountaineers preserve a more moderate government, because they are not so liable to be conquered. They defend themselves easily, and are attacked with difficulty; ammunition and provisions are collected and carried against them with great expense, for the country furnishes none.'¹⁸

Even better than mountain barriers was water. Islands were the natural home of liberty. This was not merely because of their defensive advantages. 'The inhabitants of islands have a higher relish for liberty than those of the continent. Islands are commonly of small extent; one part of the people cannot be so easily employed to oppress the other; the sea separates them from great empires; tyranny cannot so well support itself within a small compass: conquerors are stopped by the sea; and the islanders, being without the reach of their arms, more easily preserve their own laws.'¹⁹ This is, implicitly, Montesquieu's major explanation for that puzzle we noted earlier - the different trajectory of England and France. And he explicitly makes the link when showing another advantage of being an island. England, he says, is a nation which 'inhabiting an island, is not fond of conquering, because it would be weakened by distant conquests - especially as the soil of the island is good, for it has then no need of enriching itself by war: and as no citizen is subject to another, each sets a greater value on his own liberty than on the glory of one or any number of citizens.'²⁰

¹⁵Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 335

¹⁶Montesquieu, **Spirit**, II, 260

¹⁷Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 272

¹⁸Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 272

¹⁹Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 273

²⁰Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 310

The 'fury of war' brings another danger, which Montesquieu showed historically in his account of the way in which incessant aggressive warfare had been at the root of the collapse of liberty in ancient Rome, and also in the ruin caused by Louis XIV's endless wars of attempted conquest. In a section headed 'Of the Augmentation of Troops' Montesquieu described the inevitable Machiavellian law that led continental countries into suicidal wars which then led to higher taxation, poverty and despotism. 'A new distemper has spread itself over Europe, infecting our princes, and inducing them to keep up an exorbitant number of troops. It has its redoublings, and of necessity becomes contagious. For as soon as one prince augments his forces, the rest, of course, do the same; so that nothing is gained thereby but the public ruin.'²¹ Thus out of wealth Europe had created poverty and was threatened with the loss of liberty. 'We are poor with the riches and commerce of the whole world; and soon, by thus augmenting our troops, we shall be all soldiers, and be reduced to the very same situation as the Tartars.'²²

It was a vicious circle: fear - war - higher taxes - absolutism - more fear and so on. 'The consequence of such a situation is the perpetual augmentation of taxes; and the mischief which prevents all future remedy is, that they reckon no more upon their revenues, but in waging war against their whole capital.'²³ Predation was more powerful than production. Indeed it was a topsy-turvy situation where the richer a country was naturally, the more impoverished and depopulated it would become. 'Most invasions have, therefore, been made in countries which nature seems to have formed for happiness, and as nothing is more nearly allied than desolation and invasion, the best provinces are most frequently depopulated, while the frightful countries of the North continue always inhabited, from their being almost uninhabitable.'²⁴ According to Montesquieu, after the terrible devastation of the Thirty Years War and then the military adventures of Louis XIV Europe was approaching the situation of India, 'where a multitude of islands and the situation of the land have divided the country into an infinite number of petty states, which from causes that we have not here room to mention are rendered despotic. There are none there but wretches, some pillaging and others pillaged. Their grandees have very moderate fortunes, and those whom they call rich have only a bare subsistence.'²⁵

Montesquieu was able to show in detail how the process worked through his study of the rise and decline of the Roman Empire. The essence of the problem was that any success was bound to lead to disaster. It is in the nature of political institutions to grow, and when they do, they lose their way. Thus it was in the very nature of Rome to collapse. 'Rome was made for expansion, and its laws were admirable for this purpose. Thus, whatever its government had been - whether the power of kings,

²¹Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 217

²²Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 217

²³Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 217

²⁴Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 272

²⁵Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 257

aristocracy, or a popular state - it never ceased undertaking enterprises that made demands on its conduct, and succeeded in them. It did not prove wiser than all the other states on earth for a day, but continually. It sustained meager, moderate and great prosperity with the same superiority, and had neither successes from which it did not profit, nor misfortunes of which it made no use. It lost its liberty because it completed the work it wrought too soon.²⁶

He contrasts the situation here with what happens in despotisms. In despotic systems, success makes the despotism ever stronger. In free societies, success inevitably corrupts the freedom. 'What makes free states last a shorter time than others is that both the misfortunes and the successes they encounter almost always cause them to lose their freedom. In a state where the people are held in subjection, however, successes and misfortunes alike confirm their servitude. A wise republic should hazard nothing that exposes it to either good or bad fortune. The only good to which it should aspire is the perpetuation of its condition. If the greatness of the empire ruined the republic, the greatness of the city ruined it no less.'²⁷

The turning point in Rome was when she embarked on imperial conquests outside Italy. 'When the domination of Rome was limited to Italy, the republic could easily maintain itself. A soldier was equally a citizen. Every consul raised an army, and other citizens went to war in their turn under his successor. Since the number of troops was not excessive, care was taken to admit into the militia only people who had enough property to have an interest in preserving the city. Finally, the senate was able to observe the conduct of the generals and removed any thought they might have of violating their duty. But when the legions crossed the Alps and the sea, the warriors, who had to be left in the countries they were subjugating for the duration of several campaigns, gradually lost their citizen spirit. And the generals, who disposed of armies and kingdoms, sensed their own strength and could obey no longer.'²⁸ Montesquieu summarized his findings succinctly. 'Here, in a word, is the history of the Romans. By means of their maxims they conquered all peoples, but when they had succeeded in doing so, their republic could not endure. It was necessary to change the government, and contrary maxims employed by the new government made their greatness collapse.'²⁹

The actual process of the fall of Rome according to Montesquieu is helpfully summarized by D'Alembert. 'He found the causes of their decadence in the very expansion of the state, which transformed the riots of its people into civil wars; in wars made in places so distant, that citizens were forced into absences of excessive length and lost imperceptibly the spirit essential to republics; in the granting of citizenship to too many nations, and the consequent transformation of the Roman people into a sort of monster with many heads; in the corruption introduced by Asian luxury; in Sulla's proscription, which debased the nation's spirit and prepared it for slavery; in the necessity felt by the Romans, of subjecting themselves to masters, once they felt their liberty to be a burden; in the necessity of changing their maxims along with their form of government; in that series of monsters who reigned almost without interruption from Tiberius to Nerva, and from Commodus to Constantine; and, finally, in the removal

²⁶Montesquieu, **Considerations**, 94-5

²⁷Montesquieu, **Considerations**, 92

²⁸Montesquieu, **Considerations**, 91

²⁹Montesquieu, **Considerations**, 169

and partition of the empire.³⁰

What had happened in Rome was the best documented example of the danger of all continental states. If they were successful, they would have to expand to feed their success and protect their borders. But there were no limits and as they triumphed on the edges, the centre would become corrupted. It was a phenomenon which Montesquieu had seen in the history of the Spanish Empire and witnessed at first hand under Louis XIV.

Yet there is a contradictory message in Montesquieu as well. Although at times it looks as if the one quarter of the globe that had hints of non-despotic government was tumbling towards the condition of India and China, Montesquieu's argument also rested on the proposition that to a certain extent Europe was still different. He sensed that for the first time in history Europe was becoming the wealthiest and most powerful region in the world, reversing the thousands of years when it had been inferior to the Orient. 'Europe has arrived at so high a degree of power that nothing in history can be compared with it, whether we consider the immensity of its expenses, the grandeur of its engagements, the number of its troops, and the regular payment even of those that are least serviceable, and which are kept only for ostentation.'³¹ He thought that this power, and the remnants of the old spirit of liberty, arose from the fact that Europe was divided into a number of roughly equal-sized, equally powerful, states, so that no universal despotic Empire could grow up. India faced the problem of political units that were too small; China of units that were too large. Europe, though sucked into incessant wars, at least had some balancing elements.

In a key passage where he put forward his most favoured theory to account for the difference of Europe and Asia, Montesquieu wrote as follows. 'Hence it comes that in Asia the strong nations are opposed to the weak; the warlike, brave, and active people touch immediately upon those who are indolent, effeminate, and timorous; the one must, therefore, conquer, and the other be conquered. In Europe, on the contrary, strong nations are opposed to the strong; and those who join each other have nearly the same courage. This is the grand reason of the weakness of Asia, and of the strength of Europe; of the liberty of Europe, and of the slavery of Asia: a cause that I do not recollect ever to have seen remarked. Hence it proceeds that liberty in Asia never increases; whilst in Europe it is enlarged or diminished, according to particular circumstances.'³² Asia had been condemned to thousands of years of despotism. Europe vacillated, with liberty rising and collapsing, as Montesquieu had seen both in his studies of Rome and his knowledge of recent European history.

Montesquieu had thus put forward several theories to try to account for the differential success of liberty - geography in particular. Scattered through his works are a number of other theories both at the level of Europe versus China, and of England versus the Continent. One of these lay in the field of religion. At the level of Europe versus Asia, he believed that Christianity in itself was an antidote to despotism. 'The Christian religion is a stranger to mere despotic power. The mildness so frequently recommended in the gospel is incompatible with the despotic rage with which a prince punishes his

³⁰Quoted in Richter, **Montesquieu**, 55

³¹Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 369

³²Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 266

subjects, and exercises himself in cruelty.³³

What he does not seem to have done is to specify, beyond the gospel message of mildness, why Christianity had this effect. Here his experience of the concordat between Church and State in France and most of Catholic Europe may have made him aware that there was nothing intrinsic to Christianity **per se** which would lead it to be a bulwark against state power. He was aware that the mixing of religion and politics was not as extreme as in China. 'The legislators of China went further. They confounded their religion, laws, manners and customs; all these were morality, all these were virtue. The precepts relating to these four points were what they called rites; and it was the exact observance of these that the Chinese Government triumphed.'³⁴ Yet Christianity could be accommodated into a Caesaro-Papist solution as in Louis XIV's France.

The puzzle was that in one small part of Europe, in the Protestant north-west, there were signs of that desired separation between religion and power. He knew 'That we ought not to regulate by the Principles of the canon Law things which should be regulated by those of the civil Law.'³⁵ Yet this separation was unusual. Since the thing to be explained was religion, the explanation to the question of why parts of northern Europe was Protestant must lie elsewhere. Montesquieu's favourite explanation seems to have been the climate. His climatic view of religion, which so annoyed the missionaries, applied to religion as a whole. Thus he wrote that 'When a religion adapted to the climate of one country clashes too much with the climate of another it cannot be there established; and whenever it has been introduced it has been afterwards discarded. It seems to all human appearance as if the climate had prescribed the bounds of the Christian and the Mohammedan religions.'³⁶ Even within Europe, the colder north was more encouraging of liberty, and this liberty and independence led people to want a less centralized and despotic religion. Religion was the consequence of liberty, not the cause. 'The reason is plain: the people of the north have, and will forever have, a spirit of liberty and independence, which the people of the south have not; and, therefore, a religion which has no visible head is more agreeable to the independence of the climate than that which has one.'³⁷

This takes us directly on to his climatic arguments for the differential distribution of liberty. Although Montesquieu was not a climatic determinist, he did believe that the different climates both within Europe and as between Europe and Asia explained a good deal. Although he was a southern European from Bordeaux, Montesquieu had a great deal of respect for northern Europeans, a respect increased during his wide European tour in 1728-1731. He came to the conclusion that 'If we travel towards the North, we meet with people who have few vices, many virtues, and a great share of frankness and sincerity. If

³³Montesquieu, **Spirit**, II, 29

³⁴Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 301

³⁵Montesquieu, **Spirit**, II, 64

³⁶Montesquieu, **Spirit**, II, 43

³⁷Montesquieu, **Spirit**, II, 31

we draw near the South, we fancy ourselves entirely removed from the verge of morality.³⁸ The harsher climate of the north, combined with mountains and poorer soil made the north into a kind of Spartan 'dura virum nutrix' (hard nurse of men) which seemed to Montesquieu to lead to hard work and liberty. In India, 'the bad effects of the climate' was 'natural indolence', for the heat led people to want to shun agricultural work.³⁹ On the other hand, in the north 'The barrenness of the earth renders men industrious, sober, inured to hardship, courageous, and fit for war; they are obliged to procure by labor what the earth refuses to bestow spontaneously.'⁴⁰

That it was not just a harsh climate but the inhospitable and marginal resources that were important is shown by his suggestion that it is on the water-margins of the continents that trade and liberty will flourish, by forcing people into activity. Looking at Europe generally, 'We everywhere see violence and oppression give birth to a commerce founded on economy, while men are constrained to take refuge in marshes, in isles, in the shallows of the sea, and even on rocks themselves. Thus it was that Tyre, Venice, and the cities of Holland were founded.'⁴¹ He therefore began to develop the more general theory that the poorer the resources of a country, the freer the populace. Rich agriculture led to large surpluses which led to predation and hierarchy, either from outsiders or insiders. Thus monarchy is more frequently found in fruitful countries, and a republican government in those which are not so; and this is sometimes a sufficient compensation for the inconveniences they suffer by the sterility of the land.⁴² Another way of putting this was to suggest that the 'goodness of the land, in any country, naturally establishes subjection and dependence. The husbandmen, who compose the principal part of the people, are not very jealous of their liberty; they are too busy and too intent on their own private affairs. A country which overflows with wealth is afraid of pillage, afraid of an army.'⁴³ Thus people who lived on arid mountains, marshes or cold and inhospitable regions would be recompensed by the avoidance of that despotism which lurks on the fertile plains.

As yet this sounds intriguing, but crude and still fairly deterministic. But Montesquieu developed the argument in more complex ways. One was to note the effects of climate and resources on the need for commerce and the division of labour. He noted that there had been a shift in the balance and extent of trade from the south to the north of Europe. 'The ancient commerce, so far as it is known to us, was carried on from one port in the Mediterranean to another; and was almost wholly confined to the South. Now the people of the same climate, having nearly the same things of their own, have not the same need of trading amongst themselves as with those of a different climate. The commerce of Europe was,

³⁸Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 224

³⁹Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 273

⁴⁰Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 273

⁴¹Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 319

⁴²Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 271

⁴³Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 271

therefore, formerly less extended than at present.⁴⁴

As an inhabitant of Bordeaux with its famous medieval wine trade to England, Montesquieu was well aware of the northern need for southern products. However, the 'trade of Europe is, at present, carried on principally from the north to the south; and the difference of climate is the cause that the several nations have great occasion for the merchandise of each other.'⁴⁵ The prime example of this development was England. 'As this nation is situated towards the north, and has many superfluous commodities, it must want also a great number of merchandise which its climate will not produce: it has therefore entered into a great and necessary intercourse with the southern nations.'⁴⁶ More generally, it was the case that 'In Europe there is a kind of balance between the southern and northern nations. The first have every convenience of life, and few of its wants: the last have many wants, and few conveniences.'⁴⁷

We noted earlier Montesquieu's famous connection between Protestantism (piety), trade (commerce) and liberty. It is worth considering a little further the ways in which he thought commerce was beneficial in relation to liberty. One effect was in reducing war and its destructive effects, 'Peace is the natural effect of trade. Two nations who traffic with each other become reciprocally dependent.'⁴⁸ It also encouraged freedom within nations; 'the people of the North have need of liberty, for this can best procure them the means of satisfying all those wants which they have received from nature.'⁴⁹ It encouraged freedom from prejudice and good morals. 'Commerce is a cure for the most destructive prejudices; for it is almost a general rule, that wherever we find agreeable manners, there commerce flourishes; and that wherever there is commerce, there we meet with agreeable manners.'⁵⁰ It encouraged all the Protestant ethical values, as well as political self-discipline. 'True is it that when a democracy is founded on commerce, private people may acquire vast riches without a corruption of morals. This is because the spirit of commerce is naturally attended with that of frugality, economy, moderation, labor, prudence, tranquillity, order and rule. So long as this spirit subsists, the riches it produces have no bad effect.'⁵¹

⁴⁴Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 333

⁴⁵Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 333

⁴⁶Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 310

⁴⁷Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 332

⁴⁸Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 316

⁴⁹Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 332

⁵⁰Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 316

⁵¹Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 46

Montesquieu's allusion to the 'corruption of morals' in fact reveals another subtle twist to his argument, for he admitted on other occasions that commerce led to a corruption of morality and in particular to the growth of vanity. Yet even the negative effects could be positive. 'Commercial laws, it may be said, improve manners for the same reason that they destroy them. They corrupt the purest morals.'⁵² Fashion or vanity, encouraged by trade, could be extremely beneficial. 'This fashion is a subject of importance; by encouraging a trifling turn of mind, it continually increases the branches of its commerce.'⁵³ Montesquieu recognized that 'Vanity is as advantageous to a government as pride is dangerous. To be convinced of this we need only represent, on the one hand, the numberless benefits which result from vanity, as industry, the arts, fashions, politeness, and taste.'⁵⁴

In particular, Montesquieu recognized that commerce, leading to manufacture, altered the social hierarchy, leading to a powerful middle class which was a bulwark against tyranny. The contrast between an almost entirely agricultural population such as China or Russia and the powerful middle class cultures of England or Holland was impressive. 'Commerce itself is inconsistent with the Russian laws. The people are composed only of slaves employed in agriculture, and of slaves called ecclesiastics or gentlemen, who are the lords of those slaves; there is then nobody left for the third estate, which ought to be composed of mechanics and merchants.'⁵⁵

Returning now to the question of the effects of climate and terrain, we can see how complex Montesquieu's reasoning was - for instance we have climate, leading to commerce, encouraging a middle class, which formed a bulwark against despotism. Furthermore, he realized that it was not just the climate itself, but its link to political boundaries that was important. The climatic influence lay as much in the sharp variations of climate within a small area as in the actual climate. The effects would also vary depending on the political boundaries. One of Montesquieu's theories was that if all necessities could be produced within one political boundary, this would lead towards despotism, whereas if necessities had to be exchanged between political entities, this would encourage freedom. Yet it was not just trade in itself. Montesquieu noted the self-sufficiency of Egypt. 'The Egyptians - a people who by their religion and their manners were averse to all communication with strangers - had scarcely at that time any foreign trade. They enjoyed a fruitful soil and great plenty. Their country was the Japan of those times; it possessed everything within itself.'⁵⁶ The remark, 'The Japan of those times' is intriguing and is expanded elsewhere. 'Let us next consider Japan. The vast quantity of what they receive is the cause of the vast quantity of merchandise they send abroad. Things are thus in as nice an equilibrium as if the importation and exportation were but small. Besides, this kind of exuberance in the state is productive of a thousand advantages; there is a greater consumption, a greater quantity of those things on which the arts are

⁵²Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 316

⁵³Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 295

⁵⁴Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 295

⁵⁵Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 393

⁵⁶Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 336

exercised; more men employed, and more numerous means of acquiring power; exigencies may also happen that require a speedy assistance, which so opulent a state can better afford than any other.⁵⁷ This is slightly contradictory, of course, for despite the fact that Montesquieu must have been aware, as he earlier shows, that Japan had in the 1620s closed itself to foreign trade, he talks of 'the vast quantity of merchandise they send abroad.' Yet the passage is valuable as an indication of what Montesquieu thought of the stimulating effects of trade on the arts and on wealth in general.

In another striking passage he describes the connection between liberty and commerce, for not only was trade a cause of liberty, it was also a consequence, for it could only flourish where there was a certain freedom. 'Commerce is sometimes destroyed by conquerors, sometimes cramped by monarchs; it traverses the earth, flies from the places where it is oppressed, and stays where it has liberty to breathe: it reigns at present where nothing was formerly to be seen but deserts, seas, and rocks; and whence it once reigned now there are only deserts.'⁵⁸ It was a fragile, fickle, yet powerful force. Just as it could not have its full effect within a large, bounded and inward turning Empire, likewise it was just as harmful if there was too much space between the political entities, as when there was too little. Thus he noted that isolation and poverty were also linked. He believed that the fact that most African coastal societies were still tribal, was principally 'because the small countries capable of being inhabited are separated from each other by large and almost uninhabitable tracts of land.'⁵⁹

There was yet another chain of causation leading from soil and climate towards liberty and this was by way of the agricultural system, in particular the type of crops grown. Montesquieu began to develop a theory that population densities and degrees of liberty were connected. He noted four major agricultural regions in the world and their attendant population densities. 'Pasture- lands are but little peopled, because they find employment only for a few. Corn-lands employ a great many men, and vineyards infinitely more.'⁶⁰ This roughly corresponds to the three regions of Europe - the pastoral north, the corn-growing middle, and the vineyards of his own Bordeaux and the Mediterranean region, and the increasing population densities associated with them. All of these were compatible with the moderate liberty of republic and monarchy - republics in the pastoral or mixed areas, monarchy in the corn and vineyard areas.

Against the whole of Europe he placed Asia, with the fourth major system, namely wet rice cultivation. He set out the connection between dense population and rice cultivation, particularly in China, in a number of places and it seems to have been one of his implicit explanations for the fact that China seemed to have reached a plateau of wealth and to be the archetype of despotism. He thought that 'China is the place where the customs of the country can never be changed'⁶¹, a place where 'the laws,

⁵⁷Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 329-330

⁵⁸Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 333

⁵⁹Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 332

⁶⁰Montesquieu, **Spirit**, II, 8

⁶¹Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 298

manners, and customs, even those which seem quite indifferent, such as their mode of dress, are the same to this very day...as they were a thousand years ago.⁶² Since the connections between rice, over-population, and the prevalence of despotism over three-quarters of the globe is central to his argument, it is worth elaborating on his description of the links.

Montesquieu describes the intensive nature of rice cultivation, which both sucks up labour, and provides sustenance. 'In countries productive of rice, they are at vast pains in watering the land: a great number of men must therefore be employed. Besides, there is less land required to furnish subsistence for a family than in those which produce other kinds of grain. In fine, the land which is elsewhere employed in raising cattle serves immediately for the subsistence of man; and the labor which in other places is performed by cattle is there performed by men; so that the culture of the soil becomes to man an immense manufacture.'⁶³

The importance of rice was supplemented by Montesquieu's now rejected views that hot climates led to higher fertility through directly stimulating sexual activity and female reproductive capacity. 'The climate of China is surprisingly favourable to the propagation of the human species. The women are the most prolific in the whole world.'⁶⁴ More plausibly, anticipating Smith and Malthus, he argued that there was the universal desire for marriage as soon as possible. 'Wherever a place is found in which two persons can live commodiously, there they enter into marriage. Nature has a sufficient propensity to it, when unrestrained by the difficulty of subsistence.'⁶⁵ Rice being so productive and being able to accommodate more and more labour this made early marriage widespread and hence the population rose rapidly so that 'China grows every day more populous, notwithstanding the exposing of children' and 'the inhabitants are incessantly employed in tilling the lands for their subsistence.'⁶⁶

He added a third reason why the Chinese population grew so quickly, which anticipates more recent theories. This was to do with the attitudes towards the family. Although he does not link this explicitly to Confucianism or the descent system, his observation is perceptive. 'If the population of China is enormous, it is only the result of a certain way of thinking; for since children look upon their parents as gods, reverence them as such in this life, and honour them after death with sacrifices by means of which they believe that their souls, absorbed into Tyen, recommence a new existence, each one is bent on increasing a family so dutiful in this life, and so necessary for the next.'⁶⁷

⁶²Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 225

⁶³Montesquieu, **Spirit**, II, 8

⁶⁴Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 123

⁶⁵Montesquieu, **Spirit**, II, 6

⁶⁶Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 124

⁶⁷Montesquieu, **Persian Letters**, no. 120; 'Tyen' is noted as 'the heaven of the Chinese'.

The negative effect of this was that people lived on the verge of starvation, despite their immense toil and the productiveness of agriculture. 'The people, by the influence of the climate, may grow so numerous, and the means of subsisting may be so uncertain, as to render a universal application to agriculture extremely necessary'⁶⁸ This also suggests that almost all effort had to go into agriculture rather than, as in Europe, into commerce and manufacture. Even thus, 'China, like all other countries that live chiefly upon rice, is subject to frequent famines.'⁶⁹ It was a Malthusian tread-mill, for 'in China, the women are so prolific, and the human species multiplies so fast, that the lands, though never so much cultivated, are scarcely sufficient to support the inhabitants.'⁷⁰ The only compensation was that the blind fury of the populace when famine struck was the one check on the rulers and hence tempered, somewhat, the despotism. 'In spite of tyranny, China by the force of its climate will be ever populous, and triumph over the tyrannical oppressor.'⁷¹ This was because, 'From the very nature of things, a bad administration is here immediately punished. The want of subsistence in so populous a country produces sudden disorders.'⁷² Despotism it might be, but a despotism tempered by the need to provide sufficient 'bread and circuses', or rather 'rice and ritual', to stop the millions of long-suffering Chinese from rising to overthrow their masters.

Another argument concerning the relation of physical environment and political absolutism concerns the size of political unit. Montesquieu early developed a sort of political equivalent to the argument that 'small is beautiful'. He summarized his theory succinctly, that 'the natural property of small states to be governed as a republic, of middling ones to be subject to a monarch, and of large empires to be swayed by a despotic prince...'⁷³ The reasons for this are complex. One seems to be that 'A large empire supposes a despotic authority in the person who governs. It is necessary that the quickness of the prince's resolutions should supply the distance of the places they are sent to.'⁷⁴ This link was earlier foreshadowed as we have seen in Montesquieu's theory that it was the predatory expansion of Roman civilization outside Italy which inevitably changed it from a Republic into a despotic absolutism - a fear which was brought alive again by the aggressive policies of Louis XIV and only avoided by his failures.

The reasons why, in the end, the Roman Empire and despotism collapsed, and why neither the Hapsburgs nor Louis XIV had been able to make Europe into one vast despotic Empire, unlike Russia

⁶⁸Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 99

⁶⁹Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 124

⁷⁰Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 100

⁷¹Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 124

⁷²Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 124

⁷³Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 122

⁷⁴Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 122

or China, were basically, geographical. 'In Asia they have always had great empires; in Europe these could never subsist. Asia has larger plains; it is cut out into much more extensive divisions by mountains and seas; and as it lies more to the south, its springs are more easily dried up; the mountains are less covered with snow; and the rivers being not so large form more contracted barriers.'⁷⁵ For this reason, 'Power in Asia ought, then, to be always despotic: for if their slavery was not severe they would make a division inconsistent with the nature of the country.'⁷⁶ In Europe on the other hand, divided into middle sized states, rulers have to maintain a balance sufficient to keep the enthusiasm and support of their citizens. 'In Europe the natural division forms many nations of a moderate extent, in which the ruling by laws is not incompatible with the maintenance of the state: on the contrary, it is so favourable to it, that without this the state would fall into decay, and become a prey to its neighbours.'⁷⁷ This balance between middle sized political units makes it impossible to set up permanent empires, and encourages liberty. 'It is this which has formed a genius for liberty that renders every part extremely difficult to be subdued and subjected to a foreign power, otherwise than by the laws and the advantage of commerce.'⁷⁸

This analysis has been summarized and commented on by Durkheim, and was important in shaping the latter's thought. He suggests that 'the major role' in Montesquieu's ideas of what shapes the form of a society is played by 'the volume of the society'. In small-scale societies there will be republics, because the 'affairs of the community are at all times present to the eyes and mind of every single citizen.' Thus those in power are only the first among equals. 'But if the society grows larger, everything changes...The increasing differentiation of society gives rise to divergent outlooks and objectives. Further, the sovereign power becomes so great that the person who exercises it is far above all others. The society cannot but change from the republican to the monarchic form. But if the volume increases still further and becomes excessive, monarchy gives way to despotism, for a vast empire cannot subsist unless the prince has the absolute power enabling him to maintain unity among peoples scattered over so wide an area. So close is the relationship between the nature of a society and its volume that the principle peculiar to each type ceases to operate if the population increases or diminishes excessively.'⁷⁹ Durkheim admits that although there are a number of exceptions and objections to this. 'Nevertheless, Montesquieu displays great insight in attributing such influence to the number of social units. This factor is indeed of the highest importance in determining the nature of societies, and in our opinion accounts for the chief differences between them. Religion, ethics, law, the family, etc., cannot be the same in a large society as in a small one.'⁸⁰

⁷⁵Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 269

⁷⁶Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 269

⁷⁷Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 269

⁷⁸Montesquieu, **Spirit**, I, 269

⁷⁹Durkheim, **Montesquieu**, 37-8

⁸⁰Durkheim, **Montesquieu**, 38

For Montesquieu, therefore, there were two levels of analysis. Within the world as a whole, three-quarters was covered by 'despotic' regimes - that is China, India and the Near East, Turkey and Russia. Only western Europe was relatively free, enjoying monarchical and occasionally republican government. This was roughly the same picture that Machiavelli had drawn in the sixteenth century. Although Montesquieu does not explicitly make the link, the line between feudal-monarchical systems, Japan in the East, and western Europe in the West, and bureaucratic absolutisms elsewhere, was exactly the line of Mongol conquest. Some might suggest a causal connection, lying somewhere in the devastating effect of Mongol invasions on all Montesquieu's middling-level counter-balances to autocratic power, which were removed in each of the Mongol invasions. Although they spared some cities, the Mongols tended to level a great deal, destroying the centre - the towns, universities, small concentrations of wealth and power laboriously built up and left only a massive impoverished peasantry and a vacuum at the top to be filled by an absolute ruler. This happened several times in China, the Middle East, and at least once in Russia. But the Mongols stopped on the borders of Austria, and the fleets of Kublai Khan were halted on the beaches of Japan. Only where they did not penetrate did successful commercial capitalist systems with mixed governments develop.

Yet this is moving well beyond Montesquieu - though he hints at this line of argument when he compares the effects of different kind of invasions. In his **Pensees** he contrasted the effect of Islamic and Norse/Germanic invasions, and the innate tendencies towards centralization, working much faster after the former than the latter type of invasion. "From time to time there take place in the world those inundations of peoples that impose everywhere their customs and mores. The inundation of the Muslims brought despotism; the Northmen, the government of nobles. It took nine hundred years to abolish that government and to establish, in every state, monarchy...That is why there has always been an ebb and flow of empire and liberty."⁸¹

Montesquieu drew a second division, within Europe. Anticipating Marc Bloch,⁸² he saw that Europe comprised two agrarian civilizations, a Roman law civilization south of a line running through France and a Germanic common law civilization in northern France, northern Germany and to the northwards. This was an old and enduring line. There was a further division, between the absolutist tending monarchies of most of western Europe, and the few oases of open, liberal, government. It was in two such countries that his books published were published, in Holland and in Switzerland. It was in the third, England, that he was able to explore the ways in which peace, prosperity, liberty and piety could all flourish side by side.

⁸¹Quoted in Conroy, **Montesquieu**, 127

⁸² Bloch, **French Rural History**, 35