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Rolando Minuti

Studies on Montesquieu – Mapping Political Diversity



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Studies on Montesquieu - Mapping Political Diversity

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Introduction

Ever since Huart published the Paris edition of the *Esprit des Lois* in 1749, this masterpiece of the European Enlightenment has always opened with a map of the world. The publisher explained it in the foreword, citing the need for a tool to help understand books XX and XXI that dealt with trade. We can, however, go beyond this and interpret the map as a symbol of what seems to be the most important cohesive element in this complex book: the link that connects its several topics and at the same time identifies a constant problem as well as a coherent methodological approach. Going beyond Montesquieu's important and specific contributions concerning law, forms of government, the separation of powers and other essential aspects of modern political thought, we must understand an essential need that runs through all of his writings and is finally presented, in complete form in his greatest work. It is the need to explain human diversity and to describe its many and often apparently incomprehensible manifestations in a single framework that it was the political scientist's task to decipher and define.

This task is clearly set out in the *Préface* of the *Esprit des Lois*, in which the «infinie diversité de lois et de mœurs» is programmatically separated from any possibility of conceiving their existence as the mere result of «fantaisies» that rule out the possibility of rational explanations. This possibility is indeed conceived as a grid of spatial and geographic factors that comprise the foundation of the project aimed at analyzing societies and systems of government, coherently dealing with their similarities and diversities. It was a grandiose undertaking, and Montesquieu explicitly said that he was aware of its «majesté». But, he was equally aware of the difficulties to the extent they are anchored to a project aimed at providing a rational understanding of even what seems irrational in social and political phenomena, stating a main purpose and a hope «que les hommes pussent se guérir des leurs préjugés» which is the *sine qua non* for the practice of «cette vertu générale qui comprend l'amour de tous».

Therefore, the leitmotif of Montesquieu's inquiry is the explanation of diversity, starting from the environment and geographic conditions that shape and define the scenario. He used many sources – focusing much attention on travel literature – that he read with a curiosity constantly guided by a consideration of the key issue and

the need to find support for universally valid explanations. Far from the idea of the legislator's actions being totally contingent upon the physical conditions dictated by the natural environment, Montesquieu was very precise in defining the extent to which the legislator can and should work to correct it, and hence in assessing his responsibilities and judge the effects of his actions from this standpoint. The great map of social and political diversity drawn in this way is not static and flat, but rather it is the result of a complex network of factors in which history, political actions and ambitions, and a variety of circumstances come together: a complexity that is most clearly expressed in the author's concept of *esprit*.

The world beyond Europe takes on particular relevance in this context. It presented a scenario of diversities that was certainly less familiar with the respect to the European and mainly more difficult to explain in rational terms. Another reason was the prevalence, especially in Asia, of despotism that Montesquieu viewed as a system and not as a deviation, and he described it with all of its unsettling aspects with respect to a world of freedom that occupied a much smaller geographic area.

Therefore, one of Montesquieu's primary goals was to rearrange the political geography of diversity and translate it into a methodological approach for building an argumentation structure that the *Esprit des Lois* presents with great clarity. But, his explanatory structure is also subject to problems of coherence, presenting uncertainties and even contradictions. Montesquieu did not deny these problems and, in fact, highlighted them especially in his writings that were not meant for publication. However, they were always part of his work even when they conflicted with seemingly well-grounded concepts and views.

Alongside of the principles and concepts that are presented as the outcome of a complex analytical process, we see the great variety of nuances and variables that led to a non-infrequent use of the exception as the sole solution when the strength of the explanation based on already established interpretative seems to become weak and hence ineffective.

It is important to highlight these aspects in order to place the right emphasis on the problems of a tormented and difficult undertaking – mentioned in the *Préface* to the *Esprit des Lois* – and to maintain the strength of a theoretical structure that Montesquieu constantly felt the need to confirm, revise and supplement even after it had been completed and published. It is also important for a more precise grasp of influence that the *Esprit des Lois* exerted during the eighteenth century and later periods, on various aspects of culture in Europe and beyond. The book had an incisive impact not only in the field of political philosophy or, more generally, intellectual history, but on the even more complex issues of depictions, stereotypes, and images of diversity that acquire great significant in that they translate into tools for shaping, and guiding opinion.

These are the topics that tie together the several chapters of this book. They were written over a period of nearly twenty years and have been presented in different forms, venues, and languages. Compiling them in one volume seemed worthwhile in order to highlight the leitmotif and the main topic. This book also provided the opportunity to review, correct and update those papers in light of the developments and findings of more recent research.

These studies were mainly conducted in the “workshop” dedicated to the new edition of Montesquieu’s *Oeuvres complètes*. Over the course of many years the research for the new edition essentially reshaped and significantly increased our knowledge of Montesquieu’s work. It also raised new problems, proposed new interpretative perspectives and offered yet further proof that philological investigation is the essential basis for any true form of historical knowledge. The project is still underway, and the workshop still active, and while these pages were being written, work on the important and long awaited new edition of the *Esprit des Lois* continued and is continuing.

I would like to express my thanks to all those who stood by me throughout this project. During the long years that have gone into the publication of the *Oeuvres complètes*, Catherine Volpilhac-Augier, Jean Ehrard, Pierre Rétat, Lorenzo Bianchi, and many other friends and colleagues offered me the opportunity of developing a dialogue and fruitful exchange of intellectual and personal experiences, and to them I am most indebted. The Italian edition of this book would not have seen the light had it not been for Fulvio Tessitore’s friendship and generosity. And, last but definitely not least I want to thank Chris Laursen, who suggested and supported the English edition of this book.

The revised and supplemented studies in this book were originally presented in the forms and venues listed below:

Chapter 1: in *Le temps de Montesquieu. Actes du Colloque international de Genève (28–31 octobre 1998)*, publiés par M. Porret et C. Volpilhac-Augier, Geneva, Droz, 2002, pp. 223–244; *Leggere lo Spirito delle Leggi di Montesquieu*, ed. by D. Felice, Milan-Udine, Mimesis, 2010, 2 vols., vol. II, pp. 287–311.

Chapter 2: in *Studi Settecenteschi*, 17, 1997, pp. 83–110.

Chapter 3: in *Les Lumières européennes et la civilisation de la Russie*, (Proceedings of the international conference held in Saratov, 3–5 September 2001), Moscow, Nauka, 2004, pp. 31–41 (in Russian; French ed., *Cromohs*, 10, 2005); *Paradigmi dello sguardo. Percezioni, descrizioni, costruzioni e ricostruzioni della Moscovia tra Medioevo ed età moderna (uomini, merci, culture)*, ed. by I. Melani, Viterbo, Sette Città, 2011, pp. 213–247.

Chapter 4: in *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana*, anno LXX, fasc. II, Maggio-Agosto 1991, pp. 231–59; R. Minuti, *Oriente barbarico e storiografia settecentesca. Rappresentazioni della storia dei Tartari nella cultura francese del secolo XVIII*, Venice, Marsilio, 1994 (cap. 2).

Chapter 5: in *L’Inde des Lumières. Discours, histoire, savoirs (XVIIe-XIXe siècle). Etudes réunies par M. Fourcade et I. G. Zupanov*, Paris, Editions EHESS – Collection Purushartha, 2013, pp. 79–107.

Chapter 6: in *Dall’origine dei Lumi alla Rivoluzione. Scritti in onore di Luciano Guerri e Giuseppe Ricuperati*, ed. by D. Balani, D. Carpanetto, M. Roggero, Rome, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2008, pp. 385–409.

Chapter 7: in *Montesquieu, Œuvre ouverte? (1748–1755). Actes du Colloque de Bordeaux (6–8 décembre 2001)*, présentés et publiés par C. Larrère, Naples,

Liguori / Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 2005 (*Cahiers Montesquieu*, 9), pp. 253–270.

Chapter 8: in *Forjadores de la tolerancia*, ed. by C. Laursen and M. J. Villaverde, Madrid, Tecnos, 2011, pp. 181–201.

Chapter 9 has not been published before.

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Abbreviations

<i>De l'Esprit des Lois. Manuscrits I e II</i>	Montesquieu, <i>De l'Esprit des Lois. Manuscrits</i> , textes établis, présentés et annotés par Catherine Volpilhac-Auger, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation/Naples, Istituto italiano per gli studi filosofici, 2008, 2 vols. (<i>Œuvres complètes de Montesquieu</i> , 3–4).
Dodds	Muriel Dodds, <i>Les récits de voyages sources de l'Esprit des Lois de Montesquieu</i> , Paris, Champion, 1929 (reprint Geneva, Slatkine, 1980).
<i>EL</i>	Montesquieu, <i>De l'Esprit des Lois</i> , Introduction, chronologie, bibliographie, relevé de variantes et notes par Robert Derathé, Paris, Garnier Frères, 1973, 2 vols.
Masson	<i>Œuvres complètes de Montesquieu</i> , sous la direction de André Masson, Paris, Nagel, 1950–1955, 3 vols.
<i>LP</i>	Montesquieu, <i>Lettres Persanes</i> , texte établi par Edgar Mass, avec la collaboration de Cecil Courtney, Philip Stewart, Catherine Volpilhac-Auger, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation/Naples, Istituto italiano per gli studi filosofici (<i>Œuvres complètes de Montesquieu</i> , 1), 2004. In brackets, the numbers used in Montesquieu, <i>Lettres Persanes</i> , édition de Paul Vernière, Paris, Garnier, 1960.

<i>Mémoire de la critique</i>	<i>Montesquieu</i> . Textes choisis et présentés par C. Volpilhac- Auger, Paris, Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2003 («Mémoire de la critique», collection dir. Par A. Guyaux).
<i>OC</i>	Montesquieu, <i>Oeuvres complètes</i> sous la direction de Pierre Rétat et Catherine Volpilhac-Auger, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation/Naples, Istituto italiano per gli studi filosofici, 1998–2008; Lyon, ENS Editions/Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2010 - .
<i>OED I</i>	Montesquieu, <i>Oeuvres et écrits divers</i> , I, sous la direction de Pierre Rétat, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation/ Naples, Istituto italiano per gli studi filosofici, 2003 (<i>Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu</i> , 8).
<i>OED II</i>	Montesquieu, <i>Oeuvres et écrits divers</i> , II, sous la direction de Pierre Rétat, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation/ Naples, Istituto italiano per gli studi filosofici, 2006 (<i>Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu</i> , 9).
<i>P</i>	Montesquieu, <i>Pensées</i> , in <i>Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu</i> , sous la direction de André Masson, t. II, Paris, Nagel, 1950, pp. 1–677.
<i>Spicilège</i>	Montesquieu, <i>Spicilège</i> , texte établi par Rolando Minuti. Notes de Salvatore Rotta, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation/Naples, Istituto italiano per gli studi filosofici, 2002 (<i>Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu</i> , 13).
<i>Catalogue</i>	<i>Catalogue de la bibliothèque de Montesquieu à La Brède</i> , édité par Louis Desgraves et Catherine Volpilhac-Auger, Naples, Liguori/Paris, Universitas/ Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1999.
<i>Geographica</i>	<i>Extraits et notes de lectures</i> , I, <i>Geographica</i> , sous la direction de Catherine Volpilhac-Auger, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation/Napoli, Istituto italiano per gli studi filosofici (<i>Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu</i> , 16), 2007.
<i>Voyages</i>	Montesquieu, <i>Mes voyages</i> , sous la direction de Jean Ehrard. Avec la collaboration de Gilles Bertrand, Lyon, ENS éditions/Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2012 (<i>Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu</i> , 10).
<i>L'Atelier de Montesquieu</i>	Catherine Volpilhac-Auger, avec la collaboration de Claire Bustarret, <i>L'Atelier de Montesquieu. Manuscrits inédits de La Brède</i> , Napoli, Liguori/Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 2001.

- Défense* Montesquieu, *Défense de l'Esprit des lois*. Sous la direction de Pierre Rétat, Lyon, ENS éditions/Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2010 (*Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu*, 7).
- Romains* Montesquieu, *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence*. Texte établi et présenté par Françoise Weil et Cecil Courtney. Introductions et commentaires de Patrick Andrivet et Catherine Volpilhac-Augier, in *OC*, t. 2, 2000, pp. 1–318.

Chapter 1

The Natural Environment, Society and Government



Unfortunately, there are only a few surviving fragments concerning one of the most interesting areas of enquiry opened up by the young Montesquieu. In the *Nouveau Mercure* dated 1 January 1719 – and, soon afterwards, in the *Journal des Savants*¹ – we find the *prospectus* of a *Projet d'une histoire physique de la terre ancienne et moderne*. We know from indirect sources² that the thirty-year-old academic and member of parliament for Bordeaux devoted a lot of time and energy to this project, only to consign all his work to the flames, for reasons which are still unknown.³ The *prospectus* was an appeal to the international scientific community to embark on a clearly outlined and collective naturalistic-geographical project. The aim was to cover the history of the earth's geological and climatic development as well as the history of the changes and transformations brought about by human activity, with a careful balance between the two factors.

On one hand, the purpose was to provide an accurate description

de tous les changemens qui lui sont arrivez, tant generaux que particuliers, soit par les tremblemens de terre, inondations ou autres causes, avec une description exacte des differens progrès de la Terre et de la Mer, de la formation et de la perte des Isles, des Rivières, des Montagnes, des Vallées, Lacs, Golfes, Détroits, Caps

and, on the other, of the changes due to

¹ *Journal des Savants*, 6 March 1719, pp. 159 ff.

² This was reported by Aimé Martin ("Les Souvenirs inédits d'Aimée Martin" in *Intermédiaire des Chercheurs et Curieux*, 28 February 1894, col. 246) and it refers to the discovery of «quelques notes d'histoire naturelle sur lesquelles il y avait, de la main de Montesquieu: "Ces notes étoient pour servir à mon *Histoire physique du Monde*, ouvrage dont j'ai brûlé le manuscrit"» by Joachim Lainé, temporary custodian of Montesquieu's manuscripts until 1835. However, there is no surviving trace of these notes.

³ This is unusual because Montesquieu usually conserved all fragments of research and his readings throughout his career – those that went into the *Esprit des Lois* as well as those which he did not develop any further. Indeed, he devoted meticulous care to constructing the three voluminous *cahiers* of the *Pensées*, the *Spicilège*, the *Geographica II*, etc.

Ouvrages faits de la main d'homme qui ont donné une nouvelle face à la Terre, des principaux Canaux qui ont servi à joindre les Mers et les grands Fleuves, des mutations arrivées dans la nature du terrain et la constitution de l'air, des Mines nouvelles ou perduës, de la destruction des Forests, des Deserts formés par les Pestes, les Guerres et autres fleaux, avec la cause Phisique de tous ces effets, et des Remarques Critiques sur ceux qui se trouveront faux ou suspects.⁴

It was indeed a major research project, impressive not only for the multiplicity of the topics and problems under investigation but also for the emphasis placed on man's role as an agent who modifies his environment, as a protagonist who is in no way less powerful than the natural agents. Some essential aspects of Buffon's ideas on the relationship between man and the natural world seem to be present in Montesquieu's thought starting from this early project,⁵ notwithstanding the fact that Lucien Febvre interpreted the two writers as being quite different.⁶

Even if, as we have said, we do not know just how much work Montesquieu put into this project, or what findings he came up with, it is certain that he continued to take a lively interest in the natural environment and society throughout his life. His scientific curiosity and the urge to arrive at an explanation of the causes of natural phenomena through experimentation, which characterize his youthful contributions to the *Académie de Bordeaux*,⁷ gradually came to embrace a notion of complexity that had a direct bearing on the question of society and evolved in the light of a recognition of a strong inter-relationship – already described in the *Essai sur les causes* – between material and moral issues in the organization of collective life.⁸

Montesquieu was undoubtedly still reflecting on the topics of the *Projet d'une histoire physique de la terre* when he wrote the *Spicilège*. In a short, handwritten

⁴Montesquieu, *Projet d'une histoire de la terre ancienne et moderne*, texte établi, présenté et annoté par L. Bianchi, in *OED* I, p. 183.

⁵See A. Merquiol, "Montesquieu et la géographie politique", *Revue internationale d'histoire politique et constitutionnelle*, n.s., 7, 1957, pp. 127–146.

⁶L. Febvre, *La terre et l'évolution humaine*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1970 (1 ed., Paris, 1922), pp. 17–18, 105–109.

⁷His conviction about the effectiveness and power of experimental investigation emerges clearly, for example in the *Discours sur l'usage des glandes rénales*, presented at the Académie de Bordeaux in August 1718, in *OED* I, cit., p. 165: he wrote. «La plupart des choses ne paroissent extraordinaires que parce qu'elles ne sont point connües; le merveilleux tombe presque toujours a mesure qu'on s'en approche».

⁸On these topics see S. Cotta, *Montesquieu e la scienza della società*, Turin, Ramella, 1953; W. Stark, *Montesquieu, Pioneer of the Sociology of Knowledge*, London, Routledge, 1960; M. Augé, "Montesquieu, Rousseau et l'Anthropologie politique", *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*, XL, 1966, pp. 17–42; R. Aron, *Les Étapes de la pensée sociologique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1967; M. P. Masterson, "Montesquieu's grand design: the political sociology of *Esprit des Lois*", *British Journal of Political Science*, II, 1972, pp. 283–319; R. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*, Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976; A. Baum, *Montesquieu and Social Theory*, Oxford, Pergamon Press, 1979; *Montesquieu's Science of Politics. Essays on the Spirit of Laws*, ed. by D. W. Carrithers, M. A. Mosher, and P. A. Rahe, Lanham/Boulder/New York/Oxford, Rowman and Littlefield, 2001; Id., *Montesquieu and the logic of liberty*, cit.; D. Felice, *Per una scienza universale dei sistemi politico-sociali: despotismo, autonomia della giustizia e carattere delle nazioni nell'Esprit des lois di Montesquieu*, Florence, Olschki, 2005.

and subsequently crossed-out, passage, he perspicaciously outlined man's active role in modifying the natural environment in order to create conditions favouring settlement.⁹ It is a consideration rich in insights and well worth pursuing, as Montesquieu stressed at the end of the passage: «il faut que je mette en œuvre ces pensées que je n'ai pas bien digérées encore».¹⁰ His dissatisfaction with the immaturity of his reflections on these topics is also borne out by his decision to cross out this passage (albeit with a lightly drawn line, not with that systematic obscuring of the letters that characterizes other deletions). The fragment is clear both in its insistence on the problem of «remèdes» – which refers to the more general topic of industriousness – and in the importance it attributes to the matter. It is no coincidence if we find it directly taken up again in *EL*, XVIII, 7, formulated in a much more succinct and incisive way: «Les hommes, par leurs soins et par de bonnes lois, ont rendu la terre plus propre à être leur demeure».¹¹ And the tone of the passage that follows from this was an overt exaltation, significantly without references to Providence, of man's ability to modify what we would refer to as the ecosystem today: «Nous voyons couler les rivières là où étaient des lacs et des marais; c'est un bien que la nature n'a point fait, mais qui est entretenu par la nature».¹² In the Parisian manuscript of the *Esprit des Lois*, in which corrections were made in the final edition, this enthusiasm for man's power over the natural environment is even more explicit: «Il est admirable combien les hommes par leurs soins et par de bonnes lois ont bien accommodé leur planète».¹³ While it was Buffon who developed the topic of man's dominion over nature during the eighteenth century,¹⁴ we should recall how the treatment in the *Époques de la nature* is by no means radically opposed to what we find in these passages from Montesquieu. Moreover, the possibility of extending the legislator's role to questions concerning the modification of the natural environment – opening up a range of social and political possibilities which would seem to be strictly limited or conditioned by the physical nature of the sites – is clearly conceived and in part also expressed in the *Esprit des Lois*. We

⁹ «Il y a de certains lieux sur la terre inhabitables d'autres qui sont habitables sans aucun inconvénient d'autres enfin qui ne seroient pas habitables a cause de certains inconvénients s'il ne s'y avoit lestoit pas rencontré des remèdes a ces inconvénients[.] ainsi il n'est pas je crois vray que par une providence particuliere ces remèdes aient esté établis dans de certains lieux pour les rendre habitables mais il faut dire que les remèdes s'y estant trouvés ces lieux ont esté rendus habitables», (*Spicilège*, n° 298, p. 299).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *EL*, XVIII, 7; t. I, p. 306.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 306–307.

¹³ *De l'Esprit des Lois. Manuscrits II*, p. 443.

¹⁴ See J. Ehrard, *L'idée de nature en France dans la première moitié du XVIII^e siècle*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1994 (1 ed., Paris, 1963), p. 731, n. 6, picks up on L. Febvre's opinion justly emphasizing how he fails to «relever les formules de l'*Esprit des Lois* qui annoncent pourtant les idées développées dans les *Époques de la Nature*». Among the many studies concerning Buffon's thought, see in particular, J. Roger, *Buffon, un philosophe au Jardin du Roi*, Paris, Fayard, 1989 and T. Hoquet, *Buffon. Histoire naturelle et philosophie*, Paris, Champion, 2006.

would do well, rather, to reflect on the limits of this possibility and on how this concept is developed in his *magnum opus*.

As we have seen in the cited passage from the *Spicilège*, Montesquieu's attention to the problem of geography and the natural environment's influences on the lives of individuals and societies remained a constant. From the youthful essays written for the *Académie de Bordeaux* through to the publication of the *Esprit des Lois*, this interest was nurtured by experimental applications, direct observations, and considerations and opinions of a historical and political nature, that can be found in the works that preceded the publication of the *Esprit des Lois*.¹⁵

We see this, for example, in the *Discours sur la cause de la transparence des corps* presented to the Académie de Bordeaux, when Montesquieu gave a summary of the problem of extracting *nitrus* – potassium nitrate – from the earth.¹⁶ This same curiosity returns in the *Esprit des Lois*, when the nitrous nature of the terrain, noted by Du Halde, was cited as one of the chief causes of the aridity of the Central Asian steppes.¹⁷ In the *Essai d'observations sur l'histoire naturelle*, written slightly earlier than the *Discours sur la cause de la transparence des corps*, among reports of his observations with the microscope, dissections of frogs and drownings of ducks and geese, the enthusiastic young Cartesian¹⁸ went into the nutritive value of plants, and the possibilities offered by nature, that thwarted by the laziness induced by «un climat heureux».¹⁹ If in this case the reference is to Europe, and not to the fertility of the tropical climates – contrary to the theme developed in the *Esprit des Lois* – we should not overlook the methodological framework of this passage. It is, in fact, the challenge of a hostile environment that stimulates industry and draws attention to

¹⁵ On the young Montesquieu's scientific interests, see L. Bianchi, "Montesquieu naturaliste", in AA.VV., *Montesquieu. Les années de formation, 1689–1720. Actes du Colloque de Grenoble (26–27 September 1996)* réunis par C. Volpilhac Auger, Naples, Liguori/Paris, Universitas/Oxford, The Voltaire Foundation, 1999, pp. 109–124. On the scientific scope of Montesquieu's thought, see mainly D. de Casabianca, *Montesquieu. De l'étude des sciences à l'Esprit des lois*, Paris, Champion, 2008.

¹⁶ See *Resomption de la dissertation de M^r. Cardose sur le nitre*, in *Discours sur la cause de la transparence des corps suivi de trois résomptions*, 1720, texte établi par P. Rétat, présenté et annoté par A. Postigliola, in *OED* I, p. 242.

¹⁷ See *EL*, XVII, 3; t. I, p. 297.

¹⁸ This passage contains one of Montesquieu's clearest praises for Descartes: «Ce grand système de monsieur Descartes qu'on ne peut lire sans estre frappé d'étonnement ce système qui vaut lui seul tout ce que tous les homes les auteurs prophanes ont jamais écrit ce système qui soulage si fort la providance qui la fait agir avec tant de simplicité et tant de grandeur ce système immortel qui sera admiré dans tous les ages et toutes les revolutions de la philosophie est un ouvrage a la perfection du quel tous ceux qui raisonnent doivent s'interesser avec une espece de jalousie», (*Essai d'observations sur l'histoire naturelle*, 1719, texte établi, présenté et annoté par L. Bianchi, in *OED* I, p. 213).

¹⁹ «Comme nous habitons un climat heureux et que nous sommes du nombre de ceux qu'elle [nature] a le plus favorises nous jouissons de ses plus grandes faveurs sans nous soucier des moindres nous négligeons et laissons perir dans les bois des plantes qui feroient une des grandes comodités de la vie chez bien des peuples», (*ibid.*, p. 220).

the useful applications and crops,²⁰ even though, as Montesquieu would explain in the *Esprit des Lois*, other factors, with direct moral and political implications are needed to trigger the drive to industry and then maintain its impetus. In particular the degree of liberty is essential, and with frequent allusions to Locke, Montesquieu gave this as the condition for developing significant – and not merely marginal as in the case of the savages²¹ – cultivation of the earth and the moderate governance which favours life in the countries that have been made habitable by industriousness.²² This interest in the nature of the earth went hand in hand with a more acute interest in the quality of the air. We find both in *LP* 117 [121], in a passage which, from a medical standpoint, seeks to illustrate the danger of physical delocalizations and, ultimately, the risks of establishing colonies. We read

L'air se charge, comme les plantes, des particules de la terre de chaque pays. Il agit tellement sur nous, que notre tempérament en est fixé. Lorsque nous sommes transportés dans un autre pays, nous devenons malades. Les liquides étant accoutumés à une certaine consistance, les solides, à une certaine disposition, tous les deux à un certain degré de mouvement, n'en peuvent plus souffrir d'autres, et ils résistent à un nouveau ply.²³

This passage was added to the *Lettres Persanes* following the publication of the *Esprit des Lois*,²⁴ but it is by no means evidence of a belated interest, or deriving solely from Montesquieu's having read Joseph Raulin's treatise on the quality of the air, viz. *P* 2091.²⁵ From our perspective, the idea that the human machine is conditioned by external agents and the possibility of an objective evaluation – especially regarding the collectivity²⁶ – of the material causes that influence men's physical

²⁰ «On s'immagine icy qu'il n'y a que le bled qui soit destiné à la nourriture des hommes et on ne considere les autres plantes que par raport a leurs qualités médicinales [...] on leur donne une infinité de qualités qu'elles n'ont pas et personne ne pense a la vertu de nourrir qu'elles ont», (*ibid.*).

²¹ «Les pays ne sont pas cultivés en fonction de leur fertilité, mais en raison de leur liberté», (*EL*, XVIII, 3; t. I, p. 304).

²² «Les pays que l'industrie des hommes a rendus habitables, et qui ont besoin, pour exister, de la même industrie, appellent à eux le gouvernement modéré», (*EL*, XVIII, 6; t. I, p. 306).

²³ *LP* 117 [121], p. 456.

²⁴ Vernière (*Lettres Persanes*, édition de P. Vernière, Paris, Garnier, 1960; p. 254, n.1) explained that the passage, which was added to the 1754 edition, was based on his reading of a paper on «les ingrédients de l'air considéré dans l'état naturel et dans un état contre nature comme cause de maladies» that the physician Joseph Raulin (1708–1784) sent to the *Académie de Bordeaux* in 1752, (Bibliothèque Municipale de Bordeaux, ms. 828, t.105, n° 2).

²⁵ «Je voudrais commencer ainsi une dissertation. “M. Raulin, célèbre médecin de Nérac, dans une très bonne dissertation sur les ingrédients de l' air, qu'il m'a communiquée en manuscrit, a très-bien remarqué que les sels et autres matières qui étoient des ingrédients de l' air de la mer, raidissoient les fibres, etc. Ceci m'a fait faire les réflexions suivantes...”», (*P* 2091, p. 640).

²⁶ «Ces causes deviennent moins arbitraires à mesure qu'elles ont un effet plus general; ainsi nous savons mieux ce qui donne un certain caractere à une nation que ce qui donne un certain esprit à un particulier, ce qui modifie un sexe que ce qui affecte un homme, ce qui forme le genie des sociétés qui ont embrassé un genre de vie que celui d'une seule personne», (*Essai sur les causes qui peuvent affecter les esprits et les caractères*, c. 1734–1736, texte établi par P. Réétat, présenté et annoté par G. Barrera, in *OED* II, p. 219).

and psychological state are in fact central to the major work produced between his youthful output and the *Esprit des Lois*, namely the *Essai sur les causes*.²⁷

The first part of the *Essai* offers a strictly materialistic representation of the human machine and the ways in which the interaction between external environment and character, behaviour, skills of the various populations and human groups are manifested in relation to their respective geographical situations. Man is portrayed as a mesh of fibres. Drawing an analogy with the strings of a musical instrument,²⁸ the smooth and harmonious circulation of the «suc nerveux» which constitutes the vehicle for conveying sensations and ideas, depends on the quality and consistency of these fibres.²⁹ Montesquieu is extremely clear about the complexity of the production of a particular «esprit» by this intricate mechanical-chemical laboratory:

On ne sauroit croire de combien de choses depend l'état de notre esprit: ce n'est pas la seule disposition du cerveau qui le modifie, toute la machine ensemble presque toutes les parties de la machine y contribuent, et souvent celle qu'on ne soupçonneroit pas.³⁰

In the first place, it is the air that plays an essential role; and here it is not only a question of degrees of temperature – the element that was to prove predominant in the *Esprit des Lois*. The regime of the winds is given great prominence in order to emphasize the importance of changes in humidity and pressure, with important consequences on the nature of the inhabitants.³¹ The case of the sirocco wind, which causes «une pesanteur et une inquiétude universelle» and can be characterized as «l'intelligence qui préside sur toutes les têtes italiennes»³² was emblematic. Similar considerations, alluding to very different consequences on the «esprit», were advanced for the «vent de l'est» in England.³³ Along with air, according to a

²⁷ For a reconstruction of the manuscript's history, the date of editing – presumably around 1734–36 – and the publishing history of this text, see “Introduction”, in *OED* II, pp. 205–217.

²⁸ «Comme ceux qui joient de quelque instrument de musique ont soin d'y mettre des cordes qui n'ayent aucun noeud, qui n'ayent pas un endroit plus ou moins épais, plus ou moins serré que les autres, a fin qu'il ne se fasse pas d'interruption il faut de même dans notre machine pour la communication facile des mouvements que toutes les parties nerveuses soyent unies lisses qu'il y n'ait point d'endroit plus serré plus sec, moins propre à recevoir le suc nourricier que chaque partie réponde au tout, que ce tout soit un et qu'il n'y ait aucune interruption dans la contexture», (*Essai sur les causes*, cit. p. 241).

²⁹ «L'ame se redonnera des idées lorsqu'elle pourra reproduire dans le cerveau les mouvemens qu'il a eus et qu'elle y fera couler le suc nerveux la flexibilité des fibres pourra donc lui donner de la facilité pour se donner des idées», (*ibid.*, p. 229).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

³¹ «Les vents agissent ou en transportant un air plus grossier ou plus subtil, plus sec ou plus humide que celui du climat ou l'on est, ou plus chargé des particules propres du païs par ou ils ont passé, ou enfin en donnant à l'air une plus grande legereté», (*ibid.*, p. 235).

³² *Ibid.* «[...] je serois tenté de croire que cette différence qui se trouve entre l'esprit et le caractere des habitans de Lombardie et celui des autres Italiens vient de ce que la Lombardie est couverte par l'Apennin qui la deffend des ravages du chiroc».

³³ «Les Anglois ont aussi leur vent d'est, mais il y a cette différence que les maladies qui attaquent l'esprit chés les Italiens les portent beaucoup à se conserver, au lieu que celles qui attaquent l'esprit des Anglois les portent à se detruire», (*ibid.*, p. 236).

Hippocratic association that Montesquieu was well aware of and would be reinforced by further readings such as Arbuthnot, who constantly and directly referred to Hippocrates³⁴, the earth also played an important role because the mineral particles of a specific territory enter directly into the peoples' foods and thus penetrate into the laboratory-workshop of the human machine. A surviving fragment from the lost dissertation *De la différence des génies*, dating from 1717 and partially reused in the *Essai sur les causes*,³⁵ stresses the importance of the terrain: «La nature de la terre contribue beaucoup à la différence des génies».³⁶

Marl, for example, which characterizes many French regions

est pleine d'esprits volatils, qui entrent dans notre sang et par la nourriture des choses qui croissent et par les aliments dont nous nous nourrissons, et par l'air que nous respirons et qui en est mêlé. Et on ne sçauroit douter de cela, puisqu'on trouve du fer dans le corps des hommes et dans le miel.³⁷

All this had clear and immediate consequences on the behaviour and the *génie* of the various populations.³⁸ Montesquieu attributed considerable importance to this mechanistic-materialistic concept during this early phase of scientific curiosity – «il faut mettre cela dans le plus grand jour»³⁹ and it remained unchanged in the first part of the *Essai sur les causes*: «Voilà les esprits et les caracteres veritablement soumis à la difference des terroirs».⁴⁰ The same passions fit into the context of physical causality, and their effects on the machine's equilibrium and functioning are carefully examined. Moreover, there are also voluntary causes – the use of drugs, auto-excitation by means of singing and noise – which, after the external agents have been examined, shift the discourse towards the realm of responsibility. The use of the lovely metaphor of the soul, «une araignée dans sa toile» reconciles this

³⁴ John Arbuthnot, *An Essay concerning the Effects of Air on Human Bodies*, London, J. Tonson, 1733 (French trans. by Boyer de Pebrandié, *Essai des effets de l'air sur le corps humain*, Paris, Jacques Barois fils, 1742).

³⁵ R. Shackleton determined the date, *Montesquieu. A Critical Biography*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 401. There are many fragments of this work in the *Pensées*; for more insight see, in particular C. Volpilhac-Augé, "La dissertation *Sur la différence des génies*, essai de reconstruction", *Revue Montesquieu*, 4, 2000, pp. 226–237.

³⁶ P 2265, pp. 675–676.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 676. See *Essai sur les causes*, cit., p. 234: «On trouve du fer dans le miel il faut donc que les particules de ce metal s'insinuent dans les plantes et les fleurs d'ou les abeilles le tirent on en trouve dans le sang il faut donc que les plantes ou les animaux dont l' homme se nourrit se soient chargés de ces parties: on en peut dire de même des autres metaux et des autres mineraux».

³⁸ «Or, de tels volatils, une fois dans l' air y doivent produire quelque effet. Cet effet est cette légèreté, cette inconstance, cette vivacité françoise», (P 2265, p. 676). Similarly: «Le sol de l'Angleterre est une terre noire, métallique, arsenicale» which by impregnating the air and food with particles made the English «amateurs de rixes et de querelles, capricieux», while «la terre d'Italie (surtout de l' Etat du Pape) est une *pouzolana*, sulfureuse; c'est ce qui rend les Italiens bilieux», (*ibid.*).

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Essai sur les causes*, cit., p. 234.

materialist, sensist representation with Cartesian dualism.⁴¹ If in *LP* 31 [33] Montesquieu spoke of the tyranny of the body over the soul,⁴² here we can see a significant change of emphasis: not a relationship of fatal subordination (the tyranny of physicality) but rather a harmonious inter-relationship. The spider perceives movements and events that take place even at the outermost reaches of the web, feeling the stresses and effects, but – and this remains implicit in the text – when it comes down to it, it is the spider itself which builds and restores its own web. This interpretation can also be extended to the second part of the work where, in considering the role of moral causes, to which primacy is explicitly and repeatedly attributed with respect to physical causes,⁴³ we can surely recognize the naturalistic theoretical framework that characterizes the first section.⁴⁴ The doctrine of the «esprit général» is the culmination of this reflection, justified by the homogeneity of the two causal levels. It is the result of a laborious research process which is anticipated in this text with its reference to the «caractère général» of each people:

[...] il y a dans chaque nation un caractere general dont celui de chaque particulier se charge plus ou moins. Il est produit de deux manieres par les causes phisiques qui dépendent du climat dont je ne parlerai plus, et par les causes morales qui sont la combinaison des loix de la religion des moeurs et des manieres et cette espece d' émanation de la façon de penser de l'air et des sottises de la cour et de la capitale qui se répandent au loin.⁴⁵

The idea of complexity, of articulation between diverse forces and stresses that can never be strictly predetermined, and the importance of the moral over the physical causes are clearly emphasized: «La complication des causes qui forment le caractere general d'un peuple est bien grande».⁴⁶ The image of a rigid and superficial climatic determinism, which soon became a favourite target of criticism against the *Esprit des Lois*⁴⁷ – the upshot of a distorted reading due, among others, to Voltaire and the journalists of the *Nouvelles ecclésiastiques* – can be immediately dismissed by simply referring to the texts, and we would argue that in the present state of

⁴¹ On this topic see Casabianca, *Montesquieu. De l'étude des sciences à l'Esprit des Lois*, cit., (in particular pp. 346, 756 and 780).

⁴² «L'ame unie avec le corps en est sans cesse tyrannisée: si le mouvement du sang est trop lent; si les esprits ne sont pas assez épurez; s'ils ne sont pas en quantité suffisante, nous tombons dans l'accablement, et dans la tristesse: mais si nous prenons des breuvages, qui puissent changer cette disposition de notre corps; notre âme redevient capable de recevoir des impressions qui l'égayent; et elle sent un plaisir secret, de voir sa machine reprendre, pour ainsi dire, son mouvement et sa vie», (*LP* 31 [33], pp. 219–220).

⁴³ «Les causes morales forment plus le caractere general d'une nation et decident plus de la qualité de son esprit que les causes phisiques», (*Essai sur les causes*, cit., p. 257).

⁴⁴ This aspect is clearly pointed out by Cotta, in *Montesquieu e la scienza della società*, cit., pp. 100–103.

⁴⁵ *Essai sur les causes*, cit., p. 254.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 255. On the concept of the general character and the value that should be attributed to it in relation to the climate theory, see G. Benrekassa, *Montesquieu, la liberté et l'histoire*, Paris, Librairie Générale Française, 1987, pp. 170–177, and M. Crépon, *Les géographies de l'esprit*, Paris, Payot, 1996, pp. 91–95.

⁴⁷ See Shackleton, *Montesquieu. A Critical Biography*, cit., p. 303.

studies of Montesquieu this can no longer be considered a problem, except for the study of the *querelle* regarding the *Esprit des Lois*. As a matter of fact Montesquieu seems to have been more wary of what the majority of his critics were likely to say in the opposite sense, he tried to give due weight to the physical rather than the moral and political causes: «Je supplie qu'on ne m'accuse pas d'attribuer aux causes morales des choses qui n'appartiennent qu'au climat. Je sçais la part que le climat a dans la formation des caractères».⁴⁸

He was in fact surely justified, and in our opinion sincere and not motivated by merely rhetorical considerations, when in the *Défense*, he responded to the Jansenists' criticism with surprise, insisting on the almost banal level of the reflections concerning the influence of climate on the character of the *esprit* of the various nations,⁴⁹ which a substantial and complex philosophical, medical and political tradition – from Aristotle to Bodin, from Dubos to Arbuthnot – had described and documented.⁵⁰

The complexity of the causes contributing to the formation of the «esprit général» does not encroach on the legislator's scope of action. Although he cannot lay claim to absolute or abstract power – without running serious risks and producing harmful consequences, as is shown more than once in the *Esprit des Lois* – it is precisely thanks to the strength of the «causes morales» that the lawmaker is able to act incisively on the whole of the causes that contribute to the formation of the general spirit, with particular reference to those physical causes which, in an apparently rigid and absolute fashion, shape the destinies of the various political societies,

⁴⁸ P 811, p. 237.

⁴⁹ «Si l'Auteur avoit dit le contraire, on l'auroit regardé comme un homme stupide: toute la question se réduit à savoir, si dans des pays éloignés entre eux, si sous des Climats différens, il y a des caractères d'esprit nationaux? Or qu'il y ait de telles différences: cela est établi par l'universalité presque entière des livres qui ont été écrits», (*Défense*, p. 94).

⁵⁰ On these issues see in particular: G. Hervé, "Montesquieu. L'ethnographie dans l'*Esprit des Lois*. La théorie des Climats", *Revue mensuelle de l'Ecole d'Anthropologie de Paris*, 17, 1907, pp. 337–353; A. Prioult, "La Psychologie des peuples de Montesquieu", *Revue de psychologie des peuples*, 2, 1947, pp. 170–196; R. Mercier, "La théorie des climats des *Réflexions critiques* à l'*Esprit des Lois*", *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France*, 53, 1953, pp. 17–37 and 159–174; A. Merquiol, "Montesquieu et la géographie politique", cit.; R. Shackleton, "The Evolution of Montesquieu's Theory of Climate", *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 9, 1955, pp. 317–329; Id., *Montesquieu. A Critical Biography*, cit., pp. 302–319; J. Ehrard, *L'idée de nature*, cit., pp. 691–736 and *passim*; C. J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore. Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1967, pp. 551–587; S. Landucci, *I filosofi e i selvaggi*, Bari, Laterza, 1972, pp. 394–454 and *passim*; S. Rotta, "Quattro temi dell' *Esprit des Lois*", *Miscellanea Storica Ligure*, 20, 1988, 1, pp. 1347–1371; J.-P. Courtois, "Le physique et le moral dans la théorie du climat chez Montesquieu", in *Le travail des Lumières. Pour Georges Benrekassa*, ed. by C. Jacot Grapa, N. Jacques-Lefèvre, Y. Séité and C. Trevisan, Paris, Champion, 2002, pp. 139–156; Casabianca, *Montesquieu. De l'étude des sciences à l'esprit des lois*, cit., pp. 445–490. For a more general overview, see P. A. Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty: War, Religion, Commerce, Climate, Terrain, Technology, Uneasiness of Mind, the Spirit of Political Vigilance, and the Foundations of the Modern Republic*, New Haven (Conn.), Yale Univ. Press, 2009.