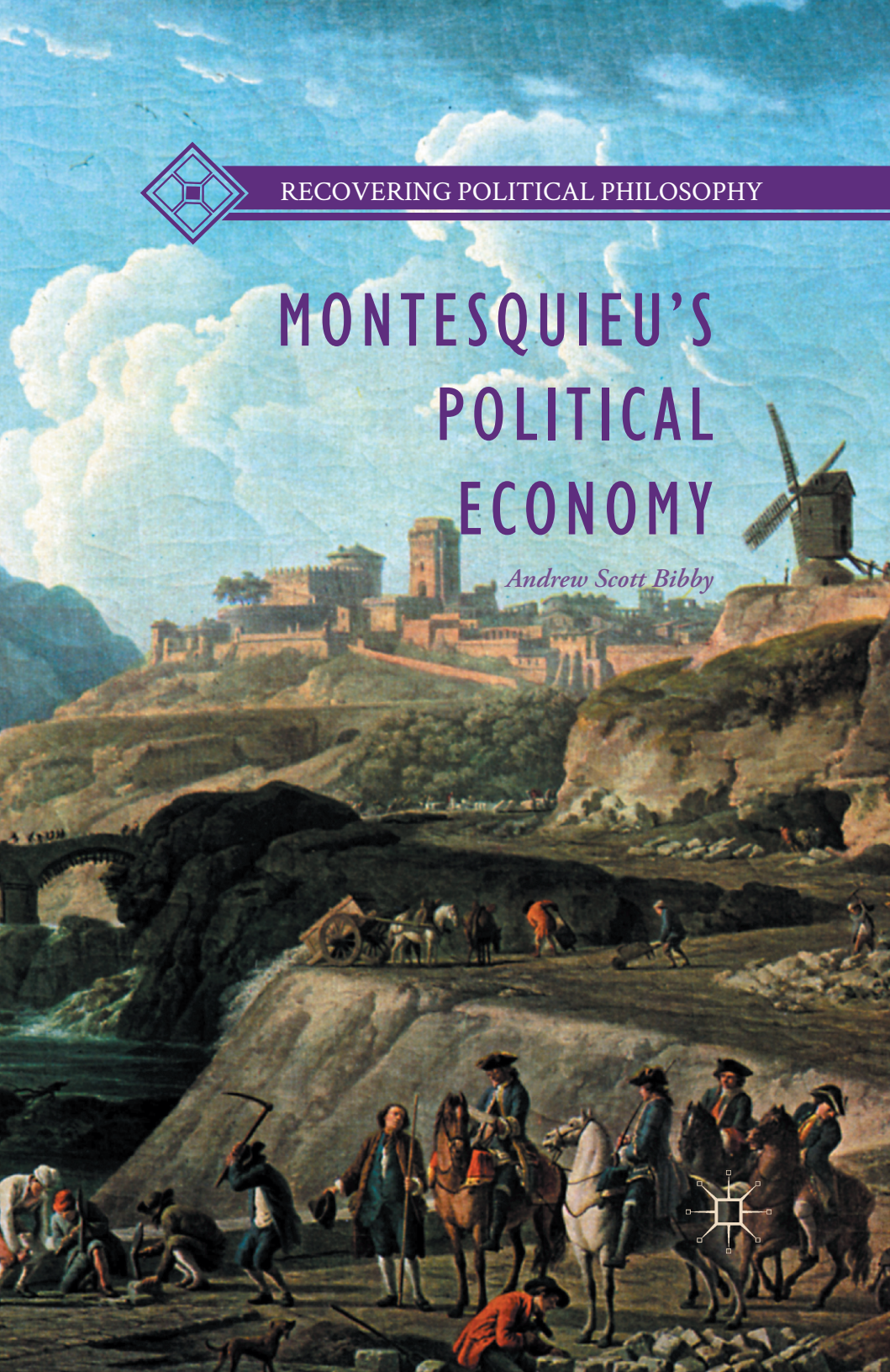




RECOVERING POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

MONTESQUIEU'S POLITICAL ECONOMY

Andrew Scott Bibby



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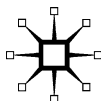
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To Julie, my wife

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SERIES EDITOR FOREWORD

Palgrave's *Recovering Political Philosophy* series is committed to publishing works on important thinkers in the history of political thought—including works by philosophers, poets, artists, theologians, and scientists who may not be regarded conventionally as political theorists. The series was founded with an eye to postmodernism's challenge to the very possibility of a rational foundation for and guidance of our political lives, a challenge that has provoked a searching re-examination of the texts of past political philosophers and political thinkers. We are especially keen to find and to publish works that help to recover the classical grounding for civic reason, as well as works that clarify the strengths and weaknesses of modern philosophic rationalism. The series aims to make available outstanding scholarship in the history of political philosophy that is inspired by the rediscovery of the diverse rhetorical strategies employed by political philosophers. Our interpretive studies will be particularly attentive to historical context and language, and to the ways in which censorship and didactic concerns impelled prudent thinkers, in widely diverse cultural conditions, to employ manifold strategies of writing—strategies that allowed them to aim at different audiences with various degrees of openness to unconventional thinking. The series offers close readings of ancient, medieval, early modern and late modern works that illuminate the human condition by attempting to answer its deepest, enduring questions, and that have (in the modern periods) laid the foundations for contemporary political, social, and economic life. The editors welcome work from both established and emerging scholars that offer analyses of a single text or a thematic study of a problem or question in a number of texts.

Andrew Bibby plumbs the depths of Montesquieu's famous argument for the political importance of commerce, presenting Montesquieu's full account of the relationship of politics and economics. After examining Montesquieu's early thinking on economics, Bibby turns to books 20 and 21 of *The Spirit of the Laws*, where Montesquieu outlines the

nature, causes, and effects of commerce, for good and ill, as exemplified in England. Bibby takes a close look at Montesquieu's account of the politics of free trade, public credit, trading companies, banks, and laws regulating business and commerce. This enables him to uncover Montesquieu's defense of venality—his attempt to make commerce honorable—as a means to promote upward social mobility. Bibby thereby refutes the reading of Montesquieu as an accommodationist, conservative, or defender of monarchical privilege and proprietorship. He demonstrates that Montesquieu, no less than Locke, defends private property as an extension of the person. Finally, by analyzing Montesquieu's world economic history and the revival of commerce in the modern world, Bibby shows that Montesquieu viewed the defense of commercial civilization as incomplete and in need of an account of its relation to religion. He finds Montesquieu suggesting that commerce and religion may be reconciled: with the legitimization of commerce, those religious opinions and practices that do not support liberty and commerce would eventually come to be labeled "extremist."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge, first and foremost, the generous support I have received from the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton. Although I owe more than a few favors, in the course of writing this book, I owe my deepest debt of gratitude to Bradford P. Wilson, not only for his generous support for research, but for his wise counsel and good humor as this research progressed into a book.

I must acknowledge four Montesquieu scholars, in particular, for their early guidance. Steven Kautz patiently suffered through my early explorations, while graciously pointing me to more fruitful areas of investigation. William B. Allen was a touchstone, and continues to be a guiding light, in wisdom and in friendship. Paul A. Rahe was instrumental, providing inspiration with the publication of his *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty*, and also valuable feedback and encouragement on the first drafts.

Finally, I would like to thank Diana Schaub, of Loyola University Maryland, both for her scholarship and intellectual companionship. There may be no better defense of the value and importance of reading Montesquieu than in the preface to her *Erotic Liberalism: Women and Revolution in Montesquieu's Persian Letters*. Montesquieu, she writes, is the “only thinker whose correction of the early moderns did not take the form of a dangerous radicalization.” Continuing, with a paraphrase of one of her own teachers:

Our prospects in our third century appear to depend on the possibility that our moral resources will incline to fortify themselves at the spirited wells of modernity.

This study draws from those wells.

NOTES ON TEXTS

All references to the *Persian Letters* are by letter number, referring to the text; for example, *Persian Letters* #64. For translation and numbering, I refer to *Persian Letters: Oxford World Classics* by Margaret Mauldon and Andrew Kahn.¹ For references and translations from Montesquieu's 1734 *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*, I refer to David Lowenthal's 1965 translation. Reference is to chapter, in capital roman numerals, and page (i.e., "IX, 93" signifies chapter nine, page 93).

References to *The Spirit of the Laws* are by capital roman numerals to indicate the book, and Arabic numerals to indicate the chapter (i.e., "XIX.29" signifies book 19, Chapter 29). For consistency, and because of the wide availability of the Cambridge version, I refer to the 1989 translation by Anne M. Cohler.² In circumstances where the translation is crucial to the argument, I indicate alternative translations.

INTRODUCTION

ECONOMIC LIBERALISM BEFORE ADAM SMITH

Montesquieu's Political Economy has two central aims. The first is to provide scholars and students of Montesquieu with an introductory survey of Montesquieu's economic ideas. Although a number of works have explained Montesquieu's economic ideas in isolation,¹ there are currently no book-length treatments of Montesquieu's economic philosophy as it relates to Montesquieu's political philosophy of liberalism.²

The second aim is to provide a fresh examination of the longstanding controversy over the meaning and purpose of Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*. A clear view of Montesquieu's political economy will not of course resolve the many attendant questions of Montesquieu's political intentions. Nor is it my aim to provide a novel or comprehensive interpretation of Montesquieu's political thought. Understanding this to be a fool's errand, I will limit myself to a narrower, and hopefully more profitable goal: to eliminate one source of the confusion that continues to cloud Montesquieu's political arguments in obscurity.

The title, *Montesquieu's Political Economy* requires some explanation. First, this study contains no claim to recover an overlooked economic system or theory. Few economic historians consider Montesquieu's economic writings to be of paramount importance for understanding the development of economic thought before Adam Smith.³ This book is meant, more simply, as a challenge to the increasingly common view that Montesquieu's political science contains no design, no argument, in favor of one kind of government over another, or that if it does, Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* betrays a reactionary conservative's preference for the monarchy of his day.

In the following chapters, one central theme will guide the selection of evidence and commentary. In a word, commerce.⁴ In book 30 of *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu provides a relevant analogy, in the context of his search for a way out of the "labrynth" of ancient feudal laws: "I find

myself in a dark labyrinth full of paths and detours, I believe that I hold the end of the thread and can walk.”⁵ The theme of commerce is just such a thread. It is of course not the only thread to follow. And it continues to pose a number of interpretative challenges, with implications for understanding both Montesquieu's political science and the history of modern political thought.

Before outlining the plan of this book, it is necessary to acknowledge the pioneers. The classic introduction to Montesquieu's views of commerce is still Albert Hirschman's *The Passions and the Interests*. In this groundbreaking work, Hirschman connected Montesquieu's writings on commerce to the emergence of capitalism. Hirschman's scholarship on Montesquieu grew out of his discontent with contemporary social science, in his words, the “incapacity” of social science “to shed light on the political consequences of economic growth.”⁶

Hirschman's interest in returning to Montesquieu went beyond economics. His interest in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century political economy displayed an infectious excitement about the possibility of recovering an old field. His writing brims with a sense of adventure, and exploration, that is, in going back to an earlier age of economic expansion, where the profound divide between the “disciplines” of economics and political science did not yet exist. The return was liberating. With no interdisciplinary boundaries to cross, Hirschman pointed out, philosophers and political economists could “range freely,” speculating without inhibitions on the questions of great social and political consequence. Among these questions were the possible effects of commercial expansion for peace, the social costs of rapid economic growth, and the promise of individual liberty and happiness.

In going back to Montesquieu, the “edifice” of eighteenth century social thought, Hirschman claimed to have discovered a novel interpretation of the spirit of capitalism. Previously, scholars had concentrated on the disjunction between the aristocratic ideals of the Feudal Age with the “bourgeois mentality” of the new age of commerce, and the Protestant Ethic. Hirschman challenged that view of early modern history, which presented two distinct historical processes, each with its own heroes and villains, each belonging independently to a social class. This was the Enlightenment as “pageant.” The spirit of capitalism was at the vanguard, assaulting and overturning the old structures of society. Commercial civilization was inevitable, predictable, a science that could be discovered and mastered, if only it could be harnessed, like the laws of motion.

Montesquieu provided a vantage point to challenge this conception of history. According to Hirschman, Montesquieu provided an “endogenous” story of change, one in which the great thinkers, political theorists,

and philosophers, were not merely swept up in social forces beyond their control, but one in which they played a significant part. They were part of a revolutionary movement, Hirschman suggested, that forever changed the trajectory of modern republicanism. But there was a catch. These champions of the spirit of capitalism were not aware, he argued, of the revolutionary potential of their own ideas. Indeed, "They would have shuddered—and revised their thinking—had they realized where their ideas would ultimately lead."

While there is no question that Hirschman's provocative thesis significantly raised the profile of Montesquieu, that is, as a proponent of capitalism "before its triumph,"⁷ new problems of interpretation were raised, and old debates were revived. Did Montesquieu in fact contribute, as Hirschman claimed, to the emergence of "revolutionary commerce" in the eighteenth century? But even so, was Montesquieu conscious of his own role?

At the start of the twentieth century, the view of Montesquieu as a "liberal" revolutionary figure—conscious or not—was arguably a splinter position.⁸ By the end of the twentieth century, however, it was no longer unusual or radical to suggest that Montesquieu's name should be included alongside John Locke as one of the founding fathers of modern liberalism. Indeed, similar positions had been staked out, independently of Albert Hirschman. Noteworthy contributions by Emile Faguet, Thomas Pangle, Raymond Aron, Isaiah Berlin, Judith Shklar, Pierre Manent, and Bernard Manin, provided significant weight. Montesquieu was more commonly understood now as a partisan of the "free constitution," a system in which interested rival ambitions check, but do not destroy each other, where "power" is a "check to power," warding off the ever-present possibility of despotism. Each, in their own way, recognized the political implications of Montesquieu's books on commerce. Today research continues to merge and overlap in interesting ways from Montesquieu experts across the fields of economics,⁹ history,¹⁰ political science,¹¹ and moral and political philosophy.

While new divisions have predictably opened up, we should not lose sight of the overlapping agreement. The most important uniting feature of the "liberal" interpretation is Montesquieu's universally acknowledged opposition to despotism. From one point of view, this is merely a banal fact. As Bertrand Binoche has put it, "for want of better government, it [despotism] is the worst."

For Montesquieu, despotism is not merely an excess of monarchy, or an object of fascination—or as one scholar has argued, a mental space to satisfy erotic perversions.¹² Rather, despotism in Montesquieu's works provides a fixed moral reference. As Céline Spector has argued, it

provides a "powerful foil."¹³ Or to borrow again from the liberal school, despotism "justifies in reverse" the moderate regime. However stated, despotism remains a standard, one consistently maintained throughout Montesquieu's life and throughout each work. It is manifest in his profound opposition to religious intolerance, in his absolute denunciation of slavery,¹⁴ and in the various attempts to humanize and promote moderation through law.

More interesting are the sharp division between and among the liberal interpreters of Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*. Did Montesquieu attempt to justify a right of resistance, or did he merely identify the empirical points where resistance had been successful in the past? Was Montesquieu a friend of liberty, a partisan of liberty, a curious onlooker? Was liberty to be found in the state, in the individual, or in the experience? In which government and in what economic system is security most likely to be found and sustained?

The lack of consensus on these questions is aggravated by a persistent denial that Montesquieu's work contains a unifying plan. As Thomas Pangle states the problem: "Any commentary on *The Spirit of the Laws* must confront the almost universal scholarly opinion of two centuries that the work lacks order and a unifying plan."¹⁵ While this may no longer be the "general view," it is still true that any attempt to discover the "plan of the author" will meet with opposition, going back at least to Voltaire, who, in his critique of Montesquieu's disorderly writing style, argued "that there is neither plan nor order and that after one has read it one doesn't know what he has read..."¹⁶

To accept the revolutionary-liberal interpretation, readers must further be willing to accept the testimony of d'Alembert, who distinguished between apparent and real disorder in Montesquieu's work. Indeed, d'Alembert argued that Montesquieu had in mind two kinds of readers: "vulgar" readers and those "who think," whose reason "ought to supply the voluntary and reasoned omissions."¹⁷ The liberal reading, in other words does not necessarily require an acceptance of esotericism. The *revolutionary* liberal reading does.

At this point, it is necessary to acknowledge the significance of Thomas Pangle's *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism: A Commentary on The Spirit of the Laws*.¹⁸ Published first in 1973, Pangle's book advanced the liberal-revolutionary reading to a high water mark. In it, Pangle argued that Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* should be a central part of the response, in his words, "to the growing crisis in the theoretical foundations" of the principles of liberal democracy. Referring to the "ferment" of the New Left, in particular, Pangle suggested that a serious political transformation was in store in the coming years; that there was a need

for a “renewed awareness” of the need to understand “liberal principles” and “to be able to give a coherent defense of them.”¹⁹ The challenge, however, was not merely to show the superiority of liberal democracy to totalitarianism or tyranny, but “its merit as compared with other forms of republicanism and limited monarchic rule.”

Why Montesquieu? According to Pangle, Montesquieu not only adopted the principles of his predecessors—Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke—but also, importantly, “subjected those principles to a new analysis based on a comprehensive investigation into political experience as revealed by the history of the European nations and the accounts available to him of non-European peoples.” The result was a modification of those principles and a new presentation of them, which included a sophisticated explication of the variety of objections to liberal republicanism and the kind of society “implied in such objections.”²⁰

If the greatest challenge to liberal republican principles came from the old republics, characterized by direct political participation, civic virtue, and a “de-emphasis” of material prosperity, as Pangle suggested, one can immediately recognize the significance of the study of commerce in *The Spirit of the Laws*. Pangle rightly connected Montesquieu—as Hirschman would later—to the emergence of the economic-liberal tradition. He went further, arguing that Montesquieu shares with Adam Smith “the honor of being the founder of modern economics.”

At the time of publication, four years before *The Passions and the Interests* came out as a book, Pangle could argue, on reasonable grounds, that Montesquieu’s role in the development of liberal economic thought had been ignored. According to Pangle, this oversight was “one of the most widely ignored facts of the history of thought.”²¹ Why had Montesquieu’s economic writings been ignored? The interpretative lapse was explainable—not as a result of ignorance on behalf of economic historians as Hirschman would suggest—but because Montesquieu “veiled” his plan in the fourth part of *The Spirit of the Laws*, concealing, consciously from his reader, the corrosive effects of commerce on traditional Christianity.

Both forms of the liberal interpretation of Montesquieu have been increasingly targeted for criticism over the decades.²² The strongest open challenge in recent years comes from Catherine Larrère, author of *L’Invention de l’économie, Du droit naturel à la physiocratie*, and *Actualité de Montesquieu*, and a number of essays, including her 2005 “Montesquieu’s Paradoxical Economics” and her 2001 “Montesquieu on Economics.” The latter may still be regarded as the most succinct existing overview of Montesquieu’s economic views in English.²³

Larrère denies that there is a revolutionary “opposition” between ancient and modern, between virtue and commerce, or between the

commercial humanism of England and the civic humanism of Rome. According to Larrère, Montesquieu did not only *not* adopt this conflict, but in fact was “content with reversing it.”²⁴ If Montesquieu did not believe that there was a revolutionary tension between commerce and virtue, he would have had no reason to “conceal” his writings on commerce. If there is a “secret chain,” she argues, it is only because it passes “unnoticed” by most readers “and not because it has been concealed.”

Céline Spector, author of *Economie et politique dans l'oeuvre de Montesquieu*, has compiled a compelling case against Montesquieu as economic liberal.²⁵ Denying that Montesquieu can be read as a modern defender of “interest,” Spector provides a useful overview of the weaknesses of the liberal interpretation. First, she claims, Montesquieu “as liberal” implies a retrospective reading that “runs the risk of projecting onto it the interpreters’ ideological choices.” Second, the liberal reading fails to take into account Montesquieu’s “philosophy of liberty.” According to Spector, liberty is a *subjective* perception, not an abstract standard of right.²⁶ Montesquieuan liberty properly understood is a psychological state (a “tranquillity of spirit”). If liberty is a feeling, not a political axiom, one cannot define *the* nature of government. A plurality of forms may equally secure this end. Finally, Spector claims that liberal interpreters have misrepresented Montesquieu’s views of commerce, modern economics, and the constitution of England.

Before attempting a response, it is necessary to anticipate objections to an even more basic claim made in this book. What does it mean to speak of Montesquieu’s political economy?

Montesquieu and Political Economy

First, it must be acknowledged that there is a general trend in the scholarship to separate Montesquieu the philosopher from Montesquieu the economist. Such a separation is not without justification. Economic historians, for example, generally dismiss Montesquieu’s economic writings as an historical oddity. In the few cases where economic historians do refer to Montesquieu, it is only in passing, and often taking the form of an explanation for his obscurity. Groenewegen, for example, argues that Montesquieu’s economic writings were essentially rendered obsolete only a few decades after the publication of *The Spirit of the Laws* in 1748.²⁷ Montesquieu’s insights were not unoriginal, but they were crude, bound to be surpassed.²⁸ According to Groenewegen, Montesquieu’s economic views were surpassed by 1760, only a few years after his death.²⁹

Joseph Schumpeter, in his classic work, *History of Economic Analysis* (1954), provides a more direct criticism of Montesquieu “as economist.”³⁰

In Schumpeter's view, Montesquieu was first and foremost a "sociologist."³¹ Writing before the birth of the new science of economics, he did not possess the conceptual tools to build a coherent economic theory.³² Schumpeter's opinion is strikingly similar to one voiced by Voltaire in 1777:

Montesquieu had no knowledge of political principles concerning wealth, manufactories, finance and commerce. These principles had hardly been discovered yet... It would have been just as impossible for him to comment on the treatise on wealth by Smith as on the mathematical principles of Newton.³³

While subsequent research has not validated the incredulity of Voltaire, this does raise an unavoidable question: what is meant by political economy?

At the most basic level, Montesquieu's political economy is viewed here as part of a longstanding enterprise to understand the relationship between politics and economics.³⁴ Montesquieu's political economy is neither systematic nor comprehensive. It does not suggest an explicit theory connecting politics to economics. Neither is it a manual for statesman on how best to manage the economic affairs of the state so as to supply wants and satisfy the desires of citizens.

The term political economy, first coined in the seventeenth century, has also acquired numerous, often contradictory meanings over its lifetime.³⁵ For Adam Smith and classical political economists, political economy was focused on two objectives: the production of wealth for society and the provision of the state with sufficient revenue to cover public services. This is the meaning of Smith's claim that political economy is "a branch of the science of a statesman or legislator." For Karl Marx, political economy revealed the ways in which the ownership of the means of production influenced historical processes. Marx identified the study of political economy with a search for "the anatomy of civil society."³⁶ For Engels, it was the "theoretical analysis of modern bourgeois society."³⁷

In the following text, I will refer to political economy in the sense that it was used and understood preceding the massive reorientation of the field as a result of the great influence of later economists like Smith and Marx. Montesquieu's political economy, first and foremost, refers to the political importance of commerce. In that sense, it grows out of—and is inseparable from—Montesquieu's political philosophy. This point is worth bearing in mind as we proceed. In the first half of the eighteenth century, political economists tended to subordinate the study of economy to political and ethical concerns, an approach that is traceable at least as

far back as the Greek philosophers and medieval political philosophy. While we will see that economics begin to emerge in Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* as an autonomous force, and therefore, a subject analyzable from the calm indifference of the point of view of science, Montesquieu's political economy could not be anything else but political. This is true whether Montesquieu is considering mercantilism, the relationship between the nobility and trade, the origins and justification of private property, or the transformation of the feudal laws.

That Montesquieu's political economy is subject to *ethical* considerations is a claim that many will find harder to accept. Nonetheless, Montesquieu engaged directly with his predecessors in moral and economic philosophy. Montesquieu consciously adapted the teachings of Mandeville, for example, who had only recently reignited the ethical controversy over commercial society, the role of self-interest, luxury, and vanity, with his 1714 *Fable of the Bees*, a work that Montesquieu quoted frequently and admired (albeit in limited ways that we will explore). Hutcheson, Hume, and Adam Smith, are examples of "political economists" in this vein, following Montesquieu, who would later give the impression that modern political economy grew out of moral philosophy.³⁸

It should not be surprising to find Montesquieu's political economy emerging alongside and interconnected with his political views. In the eighteenth century, economic writing flourished, as economic historians have shown, in the context of political crisis. The reunion of the *États généraux*, for example, prompted a series of protests against royal taxes, launching a public debate about the best way to manage the Kingdom's economic affairs. In 1685, near the end of Louis XIV's reign, economic publications spiked, with the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. The upsetting of the religious peace—combined with a depression—sparked another series of debates on economic questions. Political economists, in short, turned their attention to the economic consequences of intolerance and emigration, the social effects of theological debates on usury, and as will see, the role of government in finance, taxation, and public credit.

When Montesquieu published the *Persian Letters* in 1720, the list of topics in political economy had expanded beyond speculation on the effects of particular government policies. At the top of the list was war finance. Defeats at the Battle of Blenheim (1704) and Ramillies (1706) were followed by economic misery and the Great Famine in 1709. Political economists began to make daring connections to the nature of monarchy itself. Political economists began to draw the attention of the censors. Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban, for example, who had opposed the repeal of the Edict of Nantes on economic grounds, penned a critique of the inefficiency of the French fiscal system and was condemned

by the royal government. Pierre le Pesant, sieur de Boisguilbert, as another example, depicted the economic mismanagement of the regime as causing, in part, the “general ruin” of the state in his *Le détail de la France; la cause de la diminution de ses biens et la facilité du remède*. He was exiled to Auvergne.

As I will argue in the following chapter, Montesquieu’s interest in political economy increased steadily throughout his life, often tracking major political developments. During the 1730s, a number of works began to appear that drew his interest, especially, treatises critical of the monarchy that drew out the lessons and implications of the John Law fiasco. These included the first edition of Melon’s *Essai politique sur le commerce*, published in 1734, and Duval’s *Reflexions Politiques sur le Commerce et les Finances*, published in 1738. In the late 1740s, when war spending increased again, and the regime was forced to undertake fiscal innovations, political economy in France came to the fore, and Montesquieu was at the vanguard.

In the mid-1750s, precisely at the moment of Montesquieu’s passing, contemporaries began to take notice of the phenomenon gripping the intellectual atmosphere of the old regime. Voltaire attributed the dramatic increase in economic treatises to a “satiation” with moral and theological disputes. Others, less enthusiastic about the emergence of political economy, compared it to an “epidemic illness” of the French mind.³⁹

It is well beyond the scope of this book to say how, or whether, Montesquieu’s economic writings influenced events in the colonies of North America, if at all. One may point to the oft-repeated statistic that Montesquieu was the most quoted European political writer during the American Founding era.⁴⁰ It is commonly repeated that Montesquieu is mentioned favorably by name in the *Federalist Papers*. James Madison famously refers to Montesquieu as an “oracle” in *Federalist* No. 47. Hamilton praises Montesquieu as a “great man” in *Federalist* No. 9 (and later, “the celebrated Montesquieu,” in *Federalist* No. 78).⁴¹ But did the Founders take note of his writings on commerce and political economy?

It is clear enough that Montesquieu’s views on trade, commerce, manufacturing, finance, were well known to at least two leaders of the debate on the importance of political economy in the emerging democratic republic.⁴² Hamilton, for example, makes a point, in the *Federalist Papers*, of the necessity of reading the whole of Montesquieu. Hamilton makes a public challenge for readers not to make the mistake of reading Montesquieu’s political writings in isolation from his careful analysis of climate, civil law, and commerce. In this, Hamilton was following Montesquieu’s advice in the Preface: to not “approve or condemn the

book as a whole and not some few sentences." Rightly so, Hamilton emphasized the need to compare the "sentiments" of Montesquieu in "other parts" of the work.

Of course, Hamilton was not speaking directly to the importance of the fourth part of *The Spirit of the Laws* on commerce. But his challenge—to comprehend the work as a whole, including the books on commerce—was taken up by Jefferson.⁴³ In 1811, Jefferson finished a major translation of Claude Destutt de Tracy's *Commentaire sur l'esprit des lois de Montesquieu* into English.⁴⁴ This was one of two of Tracy's works that impressed Jefferson. The other, *A Treatise on Political Economy* (1817) became an important work in French liberal political thought during the Napoleonic period. In the Preface to the 1817 publication, Jefferson wrote, "By diffusing sound principles of Political Economy, it will protect the public industry from the parasite institutions now consuming it"

Tracy's reading of Montesquieu will not occupy us here. It is sufficient to note that Tracy was one of the founders, in the 1790s, of the classical liberal republican group known as the *Idéologues*, a group that included Cabanis, Condorcet, Constant, Daunou, Say, and Madame de Staël.⁴⁵ The reason for Jefferson's admiration of Tracy's interpretation of Montesquieu is also a complicated subject. A hint of his motive is found in the preface Jefferson wrote, in 1811, for Tracy's book, explaining the purpose of his own translation. Tracy, he said, had been a friend of the Revolution, but up until a point; that is, to the point of the "tyrannies of the monster Robespierre." According to Jefferson, Montesquieu had written an "immortal work," but it contained many "inconsistencies, paradoxes, [and] whimsical combinations." Tracy's purpose, Jefferson continued, was to "correct" Montesquieu's errors: "few nations are in a situation to profit by the detection of political errors, or to shape their practice by newly developed truths."⁴⁶

In a private letter to Tracy, Jefferson further explained his own fascination with Montesquieu:

I cannot express to you the satisfaction which I recieved from its perusal. I had, with the world, deemed Montesquieu's a work of much merit; but saw in it, with every thinking man, so much of paradox, of false principle, & misapplied fact, as to render its value equivocal on the whole. Williams and others had nibbled only at its errors. A radical correction of them therefore was a great desideratum.⁴⁷

A "radical" correction of Montesquieu in English was "the most precious gift the present age has received." It would become "the political rudiment