

# Montesquieu's (Anti-)Machiavellianism: Ordinary Acquisitiveness in *The Spirit of Laws*

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*This article dwells on what ways Montesquieu's transformative thought can be understood as an adaptation of Machiavelli's philosophy of aggrandizement. It turns especially on the question of ordinary acquisitiveness, which Montesquieu is glad to find flourishing in a world cured of Machiavellianism. But he is no simple Anti-Machiavel. Joining Machiavelli in excusing worldly acquisitiveness and facing its obstacles, Montesquieu departs from his predecessor on behalf of the ordinary individual whose wish to improve his lot in life the philosophe favors and whose security is among his first concerns. Beginning from Machiavelli's beginnings, Montesquieu moves from the grand acquirer to the ordinary and here takes Machiavellianism to a liberal conclusion. This is Montesquieu's (anti-)Machiavellianism.*

What is Montesquieu's connection to Machiavelli? The question long has called out for attention and (relative to the rest of Montesquieu scholarship) long met with silence.<sup>1</sup> There are exceptions, of course, but they are few (e.g., Carrese 2005; Levi-Malvano 1912; Rahe 2011; Shackleton 1964; Sullivan 2006). And none has dwelled on the matter in the way that I propose. In this article, I offer a reading of the connection between these authors that turns on Montesquieu's defense of what might be called ordinary acquisitiveness, a self-contained cupidity that the *philosophe* is glad to find flourishing in a world being "cured of Machiavellianism" (*SL XXI.20*).<sup>2</sup> But here is a cure that retains some of the ill, which is to say that Montesquieu is no simple *Anti-Machiavel*.<sup>3</sup>

We know from Ettore Levi-Malvano's (1912) slender volume, still a reference point in the influence scholarship, that from the beginning Montesquieu

pored over Machiavelli's works and incorporated their lessons. Traces are already apparent in the first paper that Montesquieu delivered to the Academy of Bordeaux, titled *Dissertation sur la politique des Romains dans la religion* (1716, published in 1796), which has the Florentine's fingerprints, if not his name, all over it. Levi-Malvano's findings were later reappraised in an article by Robert Shackleton, best known to Montesquieu scholars as his premier biographer, who found in the library holdings at la Brède further evidence of Montesquieu's study of his predecessor, which appears to have been a lifelong occupation (Shackleton 1964). Indeed, it seems that Montesquieu turned immediately to the author he called "this great man" when he arrived home from his grand European tour in 1731, this time reading the *Discourses on Livy* in Italian.<sup>4</sup> Soon after came his *Considerations on the Greatness of the Romans and*

<sup>1</sup>As Carrese (2005, 122–23) notes, the view of Machiavelli as a "pillar of the classical republican tradition" informs the predominant understanding of the relationship. The republican reading of Montesquieu is hardly uniform; on this, see the excellent sampling of the literature in Rahe (2009, 280–81n40).

<sup>2</sup>Citations of *The Spirit of Laws* (*SL*) refer to book and chapter, separated by a period. For all works but *Mes Pensées* and *Le Spicelège*, for which I have used Montesquieu (1991), I have used Montesquieu (1949). Translations are mine.

<sup>3</sup>See Rahe (2011), who speaks of "Montesquieu's Anti-Machiavellian Machiavellianism" and considers Montesquieu's critique of Machiavelli in its relation to the earlier "anti-Machiavellian Machiavellianism" of Thomas Hobbes and Pierre Nicole, I focus on Montesquieu's pointed remarks on the Florentine.

<sup>4</sup>On the impact of Montesquieu's tour on his thinking, see Spector (1998), who emphasizes the negative impressions of the moral effects of commerce recorded in his notebooks (e.g., *Pensées*, nos. 552, 592; *Notes sur l'Angleterre*; and *Voyage de Gratz à La Haye*); contrast Rahe (2009, 311n14), who finds such impressions overturned in *SL*. See also Haskins Gonthier (2010, 43–73) for a discussion focusing especially on England.

*their Decline* (1734), which shows again Machiavelli everywhere but in name. Not until the publication of *The Spirit of Laws* (1748) is Machiavelli mentioned—only rarely, but always with impact.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, Montesquieu's response to Machiavelli—his adaptation rather than outright rejection of the Florentine's political thought—is at the basis of a transformative constitutionalism and philosophy of commerce that anticipate the world before us. And here we touch on what I think is the broader appeal of the connection between these thinkers. For in Montesquieu's response to Machiavelli are the very seeds of globalization, a politics that the *philosophe* defines and champions rather before the fact.<sup>6</sup>

So much belongs to Montesquieu's more fundamental effort to impart to legislators a "spirit of moderation," mentioned the lines of *The Spirit of Laws*, that best express its author's perspective and aim.

I say it, and it seems to me that I have undertaken this work just to prove it: the spirit of moderation ought to be the spirit of the legislator; the political good, like the moral good, always is between two limits. (*SL XXIX.1*)<sup>7</sup>

Now, between these "two limits," so to speak, is a space for the ordinary individual's pursuit of material well-being, and the legislator guided by the "spirit of moderation" will resist the temptation to intrude upon it. This is Montesquieu's counsel, based largely, I want to suggest, on his reworking the philosophy of aggrandizement that Machiavelli had advanced in a show of scorn for taking "the middle way" [*la via del mezzo*] (Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy* I.26; see, also, II.23; III.2, 21, 40; *The Prince*, chaps. 3, 17).<sup>8</sup>

It is, then, this adapted Machiavellianism, especially as worked out in favor of the individual's wish to improve his lot in life, that I mean to consider.<sup>9</sup> I will dwell especially on Montesquieu's move in emphasis from the acquisitiveness of great men to that of ordinary

individuals and suggest that here he takes Machiavellianism to a paradoxically liberal conclusion.<sup>10</sup> I call this Montesquieu's (anti-)Machiavellianism.

Montesquieu follows Machiavelli a good distance in dismissing the moral and religious contempt for the pursuit of worldly things before he departs from the Florentine at last. He begins from Machiavelli's findings in telling ways: like his predecessor, Montesquieu finds it best to go to the "effectual truth" of precepts, to emphasize in human nature the passionate and plastic over the reasonable and fixed, and to suggest that it is a "natural and ordinary thing to desire to acquire" (Machiavelli, *Prince*, chap. 15, let. ded., chap. 9, 3; *Discourses* 1.5). It was on such bases that Machiavelli excused and unleashed worldly acquisitiveness, and in so doing he may have prepared the way for a liberal politics of "collective aggrandizement" (Orwin 1978, 1227). But to construct on such grounds a political order that is safe and secure for individuals, which from a Montesquieuian perspective is to say free, there remained much to be done. Montesquieu departs from Machiavelli on the basis of a concern for individual security, which he faults that "great man" for neglecting as he raises a question about the proper placement of the power of judging (*SL IV.5*, XI.6; Machiavelli, *Discourses* I.8; Sullivan 2006). Long after that political question is solved, Montesquieu refers to what one could call the effectual truth of Machiavelli's thought, to the "Machiavellianism" whose cure he celebrates in an economic context (*SL XXI.20*). Montesquieu's cure of Machiavellianism, then, is political and economic, and the two sorts of consideration are connected in his work by the question of acquisitiveness, hence the present article's frame.

The article begins with Montesquieu's reflections on the fate of humanity's acquisitive passions in the republics of antiquity. I locate in *The Spirit of Laws* a movement from a frugality synonymous with the "pure mores" of the ancients to the gentler "frugal mores" associated with commerce, and I find in that movement both Machiavelli's influence and the bases of Montesquieu's move away from his predecessor. I then explore that departure further, by way of a discussion of the relation of acquisitiveness to each thinker's conception of virtue. This analysis brings into relief the distinct sort of drive that each encourages—extraordinary acquisitiveness for Machiavelli, ordinary for Montesquieu. Ordinary acquisitiveness is made safe especially by Montesquieu's constitutionalism, whose

<sup>5</sup>There are three references in *SL* to Machiavelli (*SL VI.5*, XXIII.6, XXIX.19) and one to "Machiavellianism" (*SL XXI.20*).

<sup>6</sup>That is, on the basis of his response to Machiavelli, Montesquieu puts forth a liberal republicanism and a view of commerce to be embraced by liberal republics, whereby peaceful commercialism will be favored over war and individual security better supplied.

<sup>7</sup>*SL XXIX.19*, titled "Legislators," is peopled entirely by philosophers, including Machiavelli.

<sup>8</sup>Mansfield (1979, 130), suggests that Machiavellian moderation might mean keeping extremism out of sight.

<sup>9</sup>Carrese (2005) aptly refers to Montesquieu's "moderated Machiavellianism," which he finds in the latter's separation of powers. Mansfield (1989, 213–46) similarly considers Montesquieu's constitutional moderating of Machiavellianism.

<sup>10</sup>In a similar vein, Shklar (1984) argues that Montesquieu's flight from Machiavellian cruelty leads him to a defense of what she calls the "ordinary vices."

outstanding features are prepared by a confrontation with Machiavelli, on the one hand, and are the political foundations of the cure of Machiavellianism, on the other. An account of these details sheds light on a connection in *The Spirit of Laws* between a free constitution and a free commerce and thus on the connection between the political and economic aspects of the cure of Machiavellianism. It sheds light, I want to suggest, on the character of Montesquieu's (anti-)Machiavellianism.

### From Virtuous Frugality to "Frugal Mores"

The acquisitiveness that Montesquieu eventually defends against Machiavellian "strokes of authority" is first considered in light of the demands of ancient republican politics, particularly the demand for frugality. When it first appears in *The Spirit of Laws*, frugality is synonymous with virtue, the motivating "principle" of republics that is defined from the beginning in terms of a contrast: virtue is not moral or Christian, Montesquieu insists; it is political and to be understood as patriotism and "love of equality" (*SL* "Author's Foreword"). But that distinction notwithstanding, virtue's meaning is finally brought home by a metaphor that explodes the original contrast, as virtuous citizens are likened to self-renouncing monks who "love" the "very order that afflicts" them (*SL* V.2; *Pensées*, no. 731). This striking image established, Montesquieu now identifies virtue as a "love of frugality" to be attained by a ceaseless effort to keep individual holdings equal and in check.

Laws meant to enforce frugality are meant to sustain the "love of equality," which might be expressed as a desire to see the great humbled, the very "genius" of republican government that pushes up against the stubborn fact of natural superiors (*SL* VI.15, V.3, 8). But the republican genius is not satisfied automatically. Natural inequality must be wrenched into an artificial equality, which plays upon the desire to keep our betters down, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, tells our betters that superior talents are but a further obligation their possessors owe to the good of the republic. And so the ancients recognized in human beings a desire for excess to be battled or in some way redirected: let the competition be not what you have but what you have done for the fatherland (*SL* V.3–4, 17, VII.1–3, VIII.4, 11). This is a never-ending race—not a Hobbesian pursuit for "power after power," but for sacrifice after sacrifice made on behalf of the *patrie*

to which one will always owe something (*SL* V.3). To these ends, a self-renouncing frugality is instilled in a manner by which the human being "forgets himself" (*SL* I.1; V.2). And this, as Montesquieu tells the tale, is contrary to humanity's passionate and acquisitive nature.

Human beings are carried so far from nature because it is in their nature to be so carried: human beings are naturally malleable, or "flexible" (*SL*, Preface). This aspect of our nature was noticed already by Machiavelli, who decided that the quality that best distinguishes human from animal might not be reason (which the Florentine interprets as our metaphorical fangs and claws) but the distinct ability to be what the situation demands. A lion will be a lion, a fox a fox, but a man can choose (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chap. 18). Here is the prince, a manly man mischievously defined by the very qualities anathema to Cicero's man [*vir*] (Cicero, *De officiis* I.11.34, 13.41; Barlow 1999; Colish 1978).<sup>11</sup> Machiavelli means to show such a man how to take advantage of humanity's passionate nature and unwitting malleability by consciously putting his own to use.<sup>12</sup> Resting on such foundations, then, are the Machiavellian lessons that bode ill for the ordinary individuals who are Montesquieu's concern, so he takes hold of human flexibility and runs his own way. Montesquieu does not teach one to be a lion or fox; he rather shows his reader how governments and theologians, too often in league, have played upon human flexibility and shaped individuals into forms hardly resembling their naturally acquisitive selves. Against this human past and present, then, Montesquieu means to show the desire to acquire to be natural and its ordinary means of satisfaction to be "naturally permitted and necessary" (*SL* XXI.20). Ordinary acquisitiveness emerges in flight from the monastic barracks of antiquity and from other repressive orders closer to home (e.g., *SL* XX.5, XXI.5, 20).

It was in the name of their virtuous frugality that the ancients were uneasy with commerce, thought to be an activity too "vile" [*infâme*] for free men and to result in a material wealth that would be a distraction from the public good that demands a citizen's undivided attention, which is "always a very painful thing" (*SL* IV.8). So is there the moral dilemma born

<sup>11</sup>Here Machiavelli reflects on the nature of man, whose beastliness he rehabilitates as he finds in man his distinct flexibility. On the beastliness of man, held up at the expense of his godliness and humanity in Machiavelli, see Mansfield (1996, 37–38) and Strauss (1958, 78).

<sup>12</sup>Coupled with natural malleability might be natural fragility; see, for instance, *L'Asino d'oro* [*The Golden Ass*] (Machiavelli 1929, 840).

of the mingling with outsiders that commerce implies. For with foreign goods come foreign ways. While some have found Montesquieu to be sympathetic with the antique suspicion of commerce here and later in his masterwork, the rhetorical drift of *The Spirit of Laws* does not justify it, as the reflections of the early books are later repeated, and clearly not regretted, in the first chapter of the first book devoted to commerce.<sup>13</sup>

Commerce does corrupt virtue, Montesquieu there admits, but in the same breath he rejects the classical understanding of the requirements of a healthy polity: “One can say that the laws of commerce perfect mores for the same reason that these same laws ruin mores. Commerce corrupts pure mores: this was the subject of Plato’s complaints; it polishes and softens barbarous mores, as we see everyday” (*SL* XX.1). Here is a typically Montesquieuian formulation: moral progress has its source in moral decline.<sup>14</sup> It was in the name of what Montesquieu calls “pure mores” that ancient authors dreamed of self-sufficient orders unmixed with the manners of barbarous others (e.g., Aristotle, *Politics* 1327a13–40; Cicero, *On the Republic* II.3–5; Juvenal, *Satires* VI.293; Plato, *Laws* 704b–705e; *Republic* 421d–423c).<sup>15</sup> But for Montesquieu, this proves to be an aim too high. Pure morality is rooted in the “imaginary” needs of the state rather than the “real needs” of individuals (*SL* XIII.1). And so finding international trade to be a movement reaching a crescendo, Montesquieu does not wrestle with the course of history as he sees it: “The history of commerce is that of the communication of peoples,” he says approvingly (*SL* XXI.5). Montesquieu looks to the effects of an international mingling of manners and concludes that “great things have resulted” from it, including this tendency to gentler morals (*SL* XX.1, XIX.8). Pure morality closes one off to the world and hardens him; it denies one his natural tendencies to acquisitiveness. In short, pure morality proves to be a goal that is “barbarous” in its consequences. Indeed, notice how

<sup>13</sup>Larrère thus errs when she suggests that “the general pattern remains that of classical republicanism” (2001, 337–40) in commercial republics and that the books of *SL* devoted to the theme make it “very difficult to inscribe in Montesquieu an opposition between the ancients and the moderns” (Larrère 2009, 282–83). Nelson (2004, 155–64, 171–76), similarly finds in his treatment of wealth and property in Montesquieu the latter’s “Greek scale of values” at work. See also Manin (2001, 573–602) and Spector (2004). Contrast with Pangle (1973, 2010) and Rahe (2009).

<sup>14</sup>On Mandeville’s moral influence, see *SL* VII.1, XIX.8; *Pensées*, no. 1553; Carrrese (2005, 132–33); Larrère (2001, 340–41, 345–57); Rahe (2009, 176–78); Rétat (1973); and Spector (2002).

<sup>15</sup>Some nonetheless have identified Montesquieu’s Platonism (e.g., Kassem 1960; Nelson 2004).

Plato’s “pure mores” are by the stroke of a pen themselves made to appear “barbarous.”

Here is the flight to commercial mores. Its tale is anti-utopian and not a little Machiavellian. Machiavelli, who decided to turn away from the imaginary orders of Plato and others, did so in part for an awareness that “it is a very natural and ordinary thing to desire to acquire” (*The Prince*, chaps. 15, 3). It is in this spirit (with significant revisions to be discussed) that Montesquieu encourages one to look elsewhere and notice exemplars less monkish and more in keeping with his own appreciation of things. These are individuals who would rather flee than love the orders that afflict them, or “peoples who have engaged in economic commerce” (*SL* XX.5). Economic commerce, belonging to republics and to be distinguished from a monarchic commerce of luxury, is born of the “violence and vexation” of nature and governments alike.

Violent and vexing nature is beautifully exemplified by the republic of Marseilles, mentioned as Montesquieu offers something of a hymn to commerce: “Marseilles, a necessary retreat in the midst of a raging sea; Marseilles, that place where the winds, the shoals, the coastline order ships to put in, was frequented by seafaring peoples” (*SL* XX.5). He continues.

The sterility of its territory inclined its citizens to a commerce of economy. They had to be hard-working in order to supply what nature refused them; they had to be just in order to live among the barbarous nations which would come to make their prosperity; moderate in order for their government to be always tranquil; finally, of frugal mores, in order that they could live always by a commerce that they would more surely preserve when it would be less advantageous.

One has seen everywhere that violence and vexation have given birth to the commerce of economy. [...] They had to subsist; they they drew their subsistence from the entire universe. (XX.5)<sup>16</sup>

Here Montesquieu turns from the old civic stance, which had emphasized the *moral* difficulties besetting cities by the sea, and begins by making explicit the *natural* disadvantages of such a place, speaking as he does of “the sterility of its territory.” He recalls without Locke’s state of nature a Lockean view of nature as neglectful, as offering too little without human industry. Then he notes the qualities born of that natural condition. Call it necessity. By necessity,

<sup>16</sup>Manent (1998, 39–42) has shone much light on this passage. On the good effects of harsh terrain, see Macfarlane (2000, 37–38). Pangle (2010, 113) emphasizes the example of Tyre (mentioned here in *SL*) for understanding the religious implications of the spirit of commerce.

these people had to be “hard-working,” “just,” “moderate,” and “of frugal mores.” Forced by nature to acquire, they naturally acquire frugally.

Against the old education to frugality undertaken contrary to nature, then, Montesquieu suggests that a certain frugality (“frugal mores”) compatible with commerce comes naturally.<sup>17</sup> Such people “had to subsist; they drew their subsistence from the entire universe.” Necessity (in the form of scarcity and oppression) pushes up against these individuals, and those morals are born (cf. *SL XVIII.1*, 3–4, 6).<sup>18</sup> Notice, then, the Machiavellian twist: the people of Montesquieu’s peculiar island retreat were animated by those virtues, not with a view to higher ends, but because the situation called for it (Machiavelli, *Discourses* I.1.12). No education to virtue, no honorable notion of the self, and no religious restraint made them so. Natural necessity did it, and nature pays individuals for their efforts: “Nature is just toward men. It rewards them for their pains; it makes them hard-workers, because it attaches to greater work greater rewards” (*SL XIII.3*).

It is on the basis of these same remarks, however, that Montesquieu indicates a significant departure from Machiavelli. This comes into view when the passage on Marseilles is compared to a later rumination on Athens. The passages are linked by a manner of style, as Montesquieu reserves for the two a rhythm and tone unique to them alone in all of *The Spirit of Laws* (*XX.5*, *XXI.7*). Note just their opening lines. Recalling the first: “Marseilles, a necessary retreat in the midst of a raging sea; Marseilles, that place where the winds, the shoals, the coastline order ships to put in, was frequented by seafaring peoples” (*SL XX.5*). Now the second: “Athens, filled with projects for glory, Athens, which increased its jealousy in lieu of increasing its influence; more attentive to expanding its maritime empire than making use of it” (*SL XXI.7*). The stylistic parallels abound, but it is the distinct thrust of each text that is decisive. Athens is motivated by glory; Marseilles is a hideout. Athens has all the right equipment for commercial greatness (good ships, silver mines, and a hefty slave population); Marseilles is the picture of barrenness. The one is full of advantages, the other of

apparent drawbacks. But now the respective conclusions that tell the tale: with all of its potential, Athens’s livelihood was limited to the Black Sea and its environs; Marseilles, with fortune’s back turned, drew its sustenance from the “entire universe.” And so now a Lockean twist: as the English philosopher had made a day laborer seem to surpass a native American king in his enjoyment of creature comforts, so with Montesquieu does Marseilles emerge superior in matters of sustenance to Athens itself (Locke, *Two Treatises* II.41).

Machiavelli would not think to measure a state by this standard. Indeed, the same Athens that Montesquieu blames for its glory seeking was blamed by Machiavelli for its being too radically democratic for a politics of aggrandizement.<sup>19</sup> It is just this question that sets Montesquieu apart from the Florentine who excused human acquisitiveness to such great effect. Aggrandizement is not for the author of *The Spirit of Laws* in the “true spirit” of republicanism, which, again, is “peace and moderation” (*SL IX.2*).<sup>20</sup> Athens could have lived off the universe, but (contrary to the republican spirit) it was too distracted by glory. Montesquieu presents the old pursuit of greatness as destructively prejudiced (e.g., *SL X.4*). And so he opposes it to commerce, which “cures destructive prejudices,” such as those alive even in this most commercial of the imperial republics of antiquity (*SL XX.1*; *XXIX.14*).<sup>21</sup>

Commercial peoples will be more diffuse and less entangled in the bizarreries of honorific glory. In place of the old pursuit of glory, then, Montesquieu now holds up a glory newly understood. He finds a certain “daring” [*hardiesse*] admirably at play in those moved by the entrepreneurial spirit (*SL XX.4*, *XXI.11*); he recasts Odysseus as a commercial man, who would have been a better one had he owned a

<sup>19</sup>For relevant passages in Machiavelli, see Rahe (2011, 132n42).

<sup>20</sup>Montesquieu contrasts this with the “true spirit” of monarchy, which he defines as “war and aggrandizement” (*SL IX.2*), a spirit overtaken by that of commerce on his telling. Writing in the years after Louis XIV’s expansionist efforts, the *philosophe* studies the king’s failures in light of an increasingly commercial world and observes that the freest and wealthiest states at the moment are those that have favored trade over war; on this, see Macfarlane (2000, 4, 32–33, 39, 43, 51–52).

<sup>21</sup>Unlike Machiavelli, Montesquieu finds Athens strikingly similar to Rome, insofar as each is caught up in a politics of glory contrary to the spirit of commerce. Says the *philosophe*, “the Roman spirit was not commercial” (*SL XXI.5*); the Romans “rarely thought” about commerce (*SL XXI.14*); by its “political constitution,” imperial “right of nations” [*droit des gens*] and “civil law,” it was “inimical” [*accablant*] to commerce. Athens, he says, had “an abominable political law that followed from an abominable right of nations [*droit des gens*]” (*SL XXIX.14*).

<sup>17</sup>Most who have considered frugality in Montesquieu have not accounted for his development of the theme and have thus thought him to be endorsing what he finds at work in the ancients. See, for instance, Nelson (2004) and Viroli (1995, 69–76).

<sup>18</sup>In *SL XVIII*, Montesquieu suggests that nature’s stinginess is good for human beings, as it forces them to labor and to create. The pursuit of needs against stingy nature leads to intellectual progress (*SL XVIII.15*), a point picked up now and again in the books on commerce (*SL XXI.6*).

compass (*SL XXI.6–7*); and he comes to say of ship hull design what he earlier said of the Romans, that this commercially oriented theme is an object of study that he “cannot leave” behind (*SL XXI.6, XI.13*). This is clearly not the stuff of Machiavelli or his *dramatis personae*. Indeed, all told, the morality and motivations born of the commercial spirit are rather more prosaic: “Commerce introduces into the same country different sorts of peoples, a great number of conventions, types of goods, and manners of acquiring” (*SL XX.18*). The commercial spirit, like the Christian variety, ultimately is antiheroic. It defangs the heroic and secularizes what it does not abandon in Christianity, with which it at least shares the effort to manage overweening human pride. This is the stuff of progress, a movement from civic, glorious, and otherworldly concerns to living off of the universe. This, as Montesquieu understands it, is to overcome “barbarism.”

### **Barbarism: Theologians and Machiavellian Sovereigns against the Commercial Spirit**

Barbarism here is not meant to call to mind strange practices of others far from home. Barbarism is systemic, a posture contrary to nature. It is barbarous to deny what is “naturally permitted,” an act of repression against ordinary acquisitiveness that is synonymous with Plato’s “pure mores” and all that that evokes (*SL XXI.20, XX.1*). Now to the list of barbarous things will be added the principles and practices of theologians and Machiavellian sovereigns, as one finds in a chapter titled “How Commerce Broke Through (*se fit jour*) Barbarism in Europe” (*SL XXI.20*). Whereas the chapter featuring Marseilles showed the commercial spirit flourishing in a state of natural “violence and vexation,” here one finds some good and unintended effects of bad convention.

Montesquieu discusses here the moral and political obstacles to the spirit of commerce, highlighting its fugitive aspect at key moments in its movement through time and states. He presents a stylized history of commerce in Europe, where it was once indistinguishable from “the most atrocious usuries, monopolies, the levying of subsidies, and all dishonest means of acquiring money.” He speaks of Medieval Jews becoming wealthy in those dark times by an “atrocious usury” that they carried on underground and of how they were “pillaged by princes” in turn. “In those times”—the times of barbarism, if one keeps the chapter title in mind—“men were regarded as lands” (cf. *SL XXII.14*).

Like land, human beings were regarded as immobile and as matter from which an authority might derive profits and power. Jews in particular were “toyed with,” says Montesquieu, having their goods confiscated when they agreed to convert to Christianity, or being burned at the stake when they did not. But as it is the way of commerce to flourish on rocky shores, so does “one see commerce leave the bosom of vexation and despair.” Jewish bankers, similarly treated across Europe, found a way to render their effects secure by inventing bills of exchange, “and in this way commerce was able to avoid violence and maintain itself everywhere; the richest trader had only invisible goods, which could be sent everywhere and leave a trace nowhere” (*SL XXI.20*).

In these circumstances, theologians were now “obliged to curb their principles.” Montesquieu has economic principles in mind, and he finds in their retreat a good consequence born of “vexation and despair.” It is a consequence that ought to be furthered, but Montesquieu prefers in these “matters of changing religion” to work by “invitations” rather than exhortations, which is to say he takes care (*SL XXV.12*). Indeed, often in *The Spirit of Laws* he is friendly to what he calls in a less friendly way the “religion of today” (*SL X.3*). When it is praised, Christianity is praised for its softening tendencies (e.g., *SL XXIV.3*), but by that measure, commerce is more consistently held up as the most effective force.<sup>22</sup> Again, it is no small matter that monks are the models of self-renunciation. Like conquerors, they are hardened, not gentle (*SL VI.9*),<sup>23</sup> whereas “it is almost a general rule that everywhere there are gentle morals (*moeurs douces*), there is commerce, and that everywhere there is commerce, there are gentle morals” (*SL XX.1*). All told, the commercial spirit is fundamentally opposed to the Christian spirit<sup>24</sup> insofar as Montesquieu, in the words of Orwin, finds that it tends to “asceticism,

<sup>22</sup>Montesquieu praises Christianity on the basis of the softening tendencies for which Machiavelli blames it. On Montesquieu’s raising doubts about Christian softness, see Pangle (2010, 103–08, 172n18). On Christianity as an “antidote to despotism,” see Macfarlane (2000, 36–37).

<sup>23</sup>“Extremely happy men and extremely unhappy men are equally inclined to hardness (*duret *): witness monks and conquerors.” Who is the happy one? Who the unhappy? In the confusion of the question, what is clear is that one shares the defect of hardness with the other.

<sup>24</sup>Montesquieu leaves it to the reader to notice what Japan (*SL XX.9*), Islam (*SL XXII.19*), ancient Rome (*SL XXII.21–22*), and medieval scholastics’ use of Aristotle (*SL XXI.20*) have to do with Christianity as an obstacle to commerce.

hypocrisy, fanaticism, celibacy, and indifference to the exigencies of earthly prosperity” (2009, 143).<sup>25</sup>

Montesquieu wants to unleash ordinary acquisitiveness and put a shine on what it implies. Machiavelli, who also described the desire to acquire as something “natural and ordinary,” did it before him and shared with Montesquieu a posture to Christianity as an obstacle to the acquirer (Montesquieu’s “religion of today” is Machiavelli’s “present religion;” cf. *Discourses* I, pref.; *Art of War*, II; Strauss 1958, 176–77). And yet, Montesquieu places Machiavellian sovereigns next to the theologians whose barbarous principles are being curbed. What one shares with the other, in short, is a penchant for money meddling. It was just such a thing, recall, that drove the bankers of this story to their beneficent invention of bills of exchange.

After he notes that theologians were “obliged to curb their principles,” Montesquieu goes on to notice how sovereigns, too, now have had to govern themselves more wisely. Commerce (fueled by individual acquisitiveness and by invisible, and thus movable, money) is a force that protects individuals from a sovereign’s will to make their money his own. “For, as it happened, great strokes of authority [*grands coups d’autorité*] were so clumsy that experience made known that it is only the goodness of government which brings prosperity. One has begun to be cured of Machiavellianism, and one will be cured of it everyday” (*SL* XXI.20). It is thanks largely to the exchange (whose visible workings pair well with the invisible character of the Jewish invention) that we are being “cured of Machiavellianism” (*SL* XXII.10, 13–14). But as the success, which is not to say the *fact*, of “great strokes of authority” is on the wane, Montesquieu offers what Pocock (1985) has called in a different context an “ideological defence” of the exchange (48–49, 67–69, 110). The *philosophe* dwells on the exchange at length, limning its intricacies and seeking to “simplify the ideas” for his reader: an individual consults it and knows what he is worth; sovereigns depend upon it, but it is beyond their control. Montesquieu notes especially how the value of currencies fluctuates according to a “thousand circumstances” and that a prince’s will is happily not among them. The exchange shields the

individual from Machiavellian economic “strokes,” as it is beyond their reach.<sup>26</sup>

One finds here that “goodness of government” and “prosperity” go hand in hand to the exclusion of Machiavellianism. Prosperity is to be had when a government does not obstruct or impinge upon one’s pursuit of wealth and well-being. This is best attained in a commercial republic of separate powers, and the author of *The Spirit of Laws*, I now want to emphasize, makes his way to it largely on the basis of a deliberate departure from Machiavelli along both political and economic lines.

Here we touch upon another example of Machiavellian “strokes of authority,” as I consider the implications of Montesquieu’s choice to dwell on ordinary acquisitiveness over the extraordinary variety that occupies Machiavelli. It is largely on this basis, I suggest, that Montesquieu presents his new republican constitution, which is rooted in the concern for security and most in keeping with the spirit of commerce he studies. It is an order that presupposes an abandonment of the antique virtue I have discussed and safety from the Machiavellian variety that I have not. I begin, then, with a brief comparison between the two thinkers with regard to the meaning of virtue and its relation to acquisitiveness.

### From Machiavellian to Ordinary Acquisitiveness: The Basis of a Liberal Commercial Order

It is well-known that Machiavelli defines virtue not as an end in itself but as a means to political success.<sup>27</sup> For him, virtue might be “extraordinary,” “excessive,” and “extreme”; it includes “inhuman cruelty” and will stoop to criminality (Machiavelli, *Discourses* I.33, II.2, III.19, 21–22, 34; *The Prince*, chaps. 17, 8, 19; contrast Kahn 1993 and Mansfield 1996 with Skinner 1978, 119, 137–38). It is limitless and positively bound to acquisitiveness (Mansfield 1996, chap. 1). Indeed, the two often seem synonymous (e.g., Machiavelli, *Discourses* I.1, 20, 29, 46, II.1, 2, 30, 5, III.42); even liberality, classically the opposite of

<sup>25</sup>For an excellent survey of scholarly views of Montesquieu’s approach to religion, see Kingston (2001). See more recently Pangle (2010). On Montesquieu’s troubles with religious authorities, see the works cited in Rahe (2009, 318–19n42).

<sup>26</sup>Hont (2010, 217) finds economic Machiavellianism to be a tendency to “ride” the market rather than “bend” it. This is exactly what Montesquieu says it is not. On “Machiavelli’s economic attitudes,” see Jurđjević (2001), and compare Rahe (2008, 52ff.).

<sup>27</sup>On Machiavelli’s use of “virtue,” see Mansfield (1996) and the literature there referenced.

acquisition, becomes somehow an acquisitive virtue (e.g., Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chap. 16). Montesquieu also defines virtue as a means to political success, but the similarities give way to significant differences as Montesquieu dwells on what virtue implies for the ordinary run of humanity and inclines one at last to conclude that, whether ancient or Machiavellian, it asks too much of individuals. By Montesquieu's lights, republican virtue deforms humanity's naturally acquisitive "ordinary passions" (SL V.2). The problem with the Machiavellian rendition of *virtù* is that its expression by the rarest men spoils the feeling of security in ordinary individuals and thus poisons the grounds on which their acquisitive passions would otherwise flourish.

Most important here is Montesquieu's decisive removal of virtue from the pursuit of material goods—or "the comforts of life"—by identifying it, as we have seen, with monkish self-renunciation (SL V.2, 17). This for Machiavelli would be a virtue unworthy of the name. It is by his virtuosity that the Machiavellian gains and that he manages the ordinary desire to acquire at play in the individuals on whose behalf Montesquieu says: "Who would say it! Even virtue has need of limits" (SL XI.5). Hardly a Machiavellian sentiment, it is characteristic of Montesquieu's preference to dwell on ordinary acquisitiveness and the security of individuals. And so is it at the basis of his constitutionalism, which can be understood in contrast to the Machiavellian extremes it means to render obsolete. What follows is a sketch of Machiavellianism as it would be drawn from a Montesquieuian perspective.

Machiavelli's *virtù* points to a grand acquisitiveness, and so one finds him applying an economic term (*acquistare*) to conquering—an activity somehow economic, but hardly ordinary.<sup>28</sup> Here the desire to acquire is said to be "natural and ordinary" in so far as it animates everyone, but not everyone is equal to the task; nor does the desire point everyone in the same direction. The man of virtue learns the broader implications of the desire to acquire. He learns that, unmanaged, it makes a mess of human affairs: "nature has created men so that they are able to desire everything and are unable to attain everything. So, since the desire is always greater than the power of acquiring, the result is discontent with what one possesses and a lack

of satisfaction with it" (Machiavelli, *Discourses* I.37). The virtuoso learns that universal acquisitiveness finds expression in distinct "humors" (*umori*) of distinct human types: those who want to command (or oppress) and those who want not to be commanded (or oppressed) (Machiavelli, *Discourses* I.4; *The Prince*, chap. 9; *Florentine Histories*, III.1, IV.1; Mansfield 1989; Parel 1992, 6; Rahe 2008, 49–52). So here are orders of men, agitated by the necessity to acquire and hostile to one another. This is the backdrop upon which the extraordinary acquirer, or taker (*rapace*), operates. As bodily and passionate, the humors will not best be addressed by reason and speech but by the visceral that speaks louder than words. This comes into view as Machiavelli considers the question of securing gratitude, which natural acquisitiveness complicates.

The acquisitive drive, that is, tends to dilute in individuals the powers of habit and custom, key ingredients of popular gratitude. Because of it, individuals cannot be expected to remain satisfied with the prince who provides for them. Either in getting they will fail to be reliably grateful, believing that when they receive they receive their due, or after a time they will be inclined to ask "what have you done for me lately?" What's a prince to do? Here, in the book devoted to princes (but republics can have princes, too; see Machiavelli, *Discourses* I.20), a caress-or-eliminate option, never quite overturned, gives way to another set of opposites: should the prince seek to be loved or feared by his subjects (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chaps. 3, 17)? In answer, Machiavelli presents his famous reflections on Cesare Borgia's exemplary cunning and the fate of Remirro de Orco, the cruel minister enlisted by the duke to pacify the Romagna only to be thanked by being hacked into two pieces to be put on public display, a gruesome spectacle that had its good effect. By it, the people were left "satisfied and stupefied," and the reader is left with the lesson that it is better to be feared because that passion is in the prince's control, whereas love depends on the mood of individuals who are variable (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chaps. 7, 8; *Discourses* III.19–23). But does such a lesson not darken the recommendation that immediately precedes it, that a prince leave to people what is theirs (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chap. 16)? One cannot help but suspect that here the prince does himself a favor by leaving to his subjects what they will fear to lose (Rahe 2011, 133–34).<sup>29</sup>

The policy of fear, in other words, is prior in principle to Machiavelli's peculiar lesson on liberality

<sup>28</sup>This usage is especially prevalent in the *Discourses* that Montesquieu so long studied. See, for instance: Machiavelli, *Discourses* I.1.3, 4; I.6.3, 4; I.18.4; I.20 [Title]; I.29.1–3; I.30.1; I.34.1; I.52.3; II.1 [Title], 1, 3; II.2.1; II.4.1, 2; II.6.1; II.17.1, 3; II.19.1, 2; II.22.1; II.27.2; II.30.1, 5; II.31.2; II.32.1–2; II.33.1; III.10.3; III.12.1; III.35.2; III.40.1; III.42.1; III.45.1.

<sup>29</sup>On the relevant chapters of *The Prince*, I have benefited especially from Orwin (1978).



(Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chap. 16). By Machiavelli's approach, one will be grateful, and the prince even thought liberal, not when he gives, but when he refrains from taking. In this light, possessions left to subjects are one contributing factor to the state of fear, which produces gratitude where just deserts do not. Another factor, drawn from the same principle, is recourse to spectacular executions by which a prince reminds individuals of their dependence on him (Mansfield 1989, 131–34, 139–42). As fear of losing one's property produces gratitude for its remaining one's own, then, so does fear of punishment produce gratitude for one's head not being on the block. But this requires *someone's* head to be on the block from time to time (e.g., Machiavelli, *Discourses* I.24, 28–32; II.3, 16, 23, 34, 45; III.1, 22, 49). Call them refoundings, these periodic renewals. Or call them what Montesquieu has called them: “great strokes of authority.” Their growing obsolescence allows him to decide that the world is being “cured of Machiavellianism” (*SL XXI.20*). As we have seen, the cure is announced in a commercial context: the “great strokes of authority” refer there especially to princely money meddling, which is addressed by the power of the exchange. But earlier in *The Spirit of Laws*, these acts are embodied in such punishments as those recommended by Machiavelli, which are addressed not by the exchange but by an institutional arrangement. The cure of Machiavellianism, in other words, is in its fullness prepared politically, with an arrangement that relies not on fear but a certain sort of hope, on an acquisitive passion. A few words now on the passionate basis of Montesquieu's (anti-)Machiavellian order will set the stage for a few words more on its institutional features.

While Machiavelli finds Cesare Borgia exemplary for his joining satisfaction to stupefaction, then, Montesquieu takes a different tack and suggests a humane and politically sound means of removing stupefaction from the formula and replacing it with “hope for the comforts of life,” an extension of the natural desire for security that, as we will see, his constitutional order is meant to satisfy. Montesquieu identifies what for him is the passion politically to reckon on as he considers fear where it is most prevalent. This is despotism, the form whose sorry subjects are made to act by the threat of the despot's “ever-raised arm” (*SL III.3*, 9–10). But well after the reader of *The Spirit of Laws* is accustomed to the identification of fear as the sole motivating passion of this dreaded order, Montesquieu finds a peculiar substitute in “hope for the comforts of life,” which is now said to be the only thing that will make its subjects move

(*SL V.17*). The substitution is momentary but significant, as it speaks to Montesquieu's later understanding of liberty as the absence of fear (noted below) and as it reveals something about the role that despotism plays in *The Spirit of Laws*, which I touch on now.

Montesquieu describes despotism in terms strikingly similar to those with which he describes the prepolitical state, and in so doing, I believe that he often uses despotism (in lieu of the state of nature mentioned less often) as a means to show what is natural to human beings.<sup>30</sup> Despotism is where what is natural is most clearly violated, as fear overwhelms all “natural feelings,” such as “respect for a father” or “tenderness for one's women and children” (*SL III.10*). But on its basis Montesquieu shows how not to violate what is natural, or as we have seen him put it in a commercial context, what is “naturally permitted and necessary” (*SL XXI.20*). Montesquieu, then, draws this natural hope from despotism, which from here in his masterwork regains its status as the form ruled by fear. But now he has the natural hope for cozy living as a standard to apply to all forms of government. And the relevant point here is that a free order will play not on fear, but on this “hope for the comforts of life” that is tainted in the Machiavellian order given to visible executions and other “extraordinary means.”<sup>31</sup> Fear need not be kept alive when one can move human beings and contain them by enticements. And so Montesquieu leaves Machiavelli (“full of his idol, Duke Valentino”) behind as he finds that carrots will do their work even when sticks are in short supply (*SL XXIX.19*). This sets the basis for a form of government that will leave citizens what is theirs without having recourse to terrorizing them, a government opposed to policies that “render ownership of goods uncertain” (*SL V.15*).

Tellingly, Montesquieu's later description of that government's institutional order is announced, as it were, with his first reference to Machiavelli in *The Spirit of Laws*. The context is a chapter that, according to its title, asks whether the sovereign ought to judge (*SL VI.5*).<sup>32</sup> Montesquieu begins with Machiavelli and

<sup>30</sup>Savages and subjects of despotism are both described as “timid” and “ignorant,” but the latter are said additionally to be “downcast” [*abattus*] (*SL I.1*, 2; *V.14*). Though the matter is rather complex (given, for instance, Montesquieu's few remarks on the state of nature), I do not mean to suggest that the state of nature is simply unimportant to Montesquieu's thought. Rahe (2012; 2011, 131–33) and Zuckert (2001), for instance, find it to be quite significant.

<sup>31</sup>On Christianity's being at odds with pursuing the “comforts of life,” see Pangle (2010, 102).

<sup>32</sup>For a fine extended treatment of Montesquieu on the power of judging, see Carrese (2003).

alludes to passages of the *Discourses* that follow on the famously novel thesis advanced earlier in the work, that republican liberty is sustained, not overturned, by conflict (Machiavelli, *Discourses* I.7; Rahe 2011, 129–33). Montesquieu does not object to Machiavelli on this point; indeed, he says he gladly would have followed that “great man” were it not for the latter’s neglect of individual security (Carrese 2005, 137–40; Sullivan 2006). And so the first mention of Machiavelli in *The Spirit of Laws* brings both a rejection and an endorsement. The rejection is explicit: Montesquieu means to show concern, where his predecessor did not, for the “security of individuals.” The endorsement is implicit: Montesquieu quietly accepts the Machiavellian conflict thesis (Carrese 2003, 39–40, 49, 56–58; 2005; Rahe 1994, 414n173). He then later makes the thesis his own, with the constitution of separate powers, an (anti-) Machiavellian arrangement based on the notion that conflict, rightly managed, will provide the individual security (now synonymous “political liberty”) that Machiavelli had neglected (*SL* XI.6).

There is, then, a sure link between the first reference to Machiavelli, which turns on the power of judging, and the chapter of *The Spirit of Laws* that most famously treats that power, where one finds fear addressed by the form of government that Montesquieu introduces as a “disposition of things” (*SL* XI.5). This is the government of separate powers, the only in *The Spirit of Laws* whose “direct object” is “political liberty,” which Montesquieu defines as the feeling or opinion of security that citizens experience in the absence of the very fear that Machiavelli believes to be the most reliable passion (*SL* XI.6, XII.1–2; *Pensées*, no. 943). Telling, too, is the manner in which this sense of freedom, or “tranquility of mind,” is supplied: in a move original with him, Montesquieu deletes from the executive power the power of executing individuals (*SL* XI.6; Mansfield 1989, 234–35). Indeed, it is only then that he defines political liberty. And surely, this key separation of one power from the other is made with Machiavelli in mind, for here Montesquieu answers in the negative the question raised when he confronted his “great” forebear five books earlier (*SL* VI.5). On behalf of the security of individuals that did not sufficiently occupy Machiavelli, the most famous chapter of *The Spirit of Laws* answers that the judicial power ought not to be the sovereign’s.

Whereas Machiavelli recommends fear as a firm basis of one’s rule, then, Montesquieu plays upon the universal desire for security and the natural “hope for the comforts of life” that moves individuals and fulfills it institutionally, especially by separating the power that guides one’s life (executive) from the

power that can end it (judicial). And so the acquisitive “ordinary passions” finally get their due. Those passions so far have been squashed by old republican frugality, obstructed by medieval Schoolmen, and freed but finally abused by Machiavellian sovereigns. Only now may ordinary acquisitiveness come into play without having to be violently managed by the state.

The political side of the cure of Machiavellianism belongs to Montesquieu’s turn from Machiavellian acquisition (oriented to conquering sovereigns and their activities destructive of humanity) to the desire to acquire as it plays out in ordinary human beings. The Machiavellian question (why not focus on how to acquire?) is now asked of ordinary human beings rather than of princes taught to keep naturally acquisitive individuals in check. These are people living under a constitution that encourages their acquisitiveness, which is made safe at the highest level by an arrangement that mirrors in its effects the effects of the commercial spirit. The form most in keeping with the ascendant spirit of commerce is not Machiavelli’s Rome, but a government reasoned out on the basis of England, a republic in monarchic drag (*SL* V.19).

## **The New Rome and the Late Modern World**

Though I have focused on Montesquieu’s (anti-) Machiavellian answer to the individual’s wish to improve his lot in life, I do hope the reader has sensed in that answer the original stirrings of things now familiar to us. I think that anyone interested in liberalism, the politics of globalization, constitutionalism, and commercialism, will be hard-pressed to find before Montesquieu a thinker who better anticipates and advocates such defining aspects of our moment.

Dwelling on an earlier moment, I have tried to show something of the obstacles to ordinary acquisitiveness that Montesquieu means to address in *The Spirit of Laws*. Two versions of the opposition to the pursuit of earthly prosperity—one in the name of one’s order here below, the other in the name of an otherworldly order—are presented as barbarous by Montesquieu for opposing what is “naturally permitted and necessary.” The first (old republicanism) is fearful of foreign influence and of material distractions from the good of the polity; the second (Christianity) adds a layer of religious indignation to the antique civic denunciation of the desire to acquire. Machiavelli, too, treated these as obstacles to

the acquirer, and yet, as we have seen, Montesquieu pairs him with the theologians who stifle the acquisitive spirit.

This, I have suggested, is because Machiavelli's effort in the end was more favorable to the grand acquirer than to the ordinary. His effort was bound in his political imagination to his choice of model: republican Rome, the republic so acquisitive it became an empire. Such an order makes use of the desire to acquire as it moves ordinary individuals, but in a way that ultimately bodes ill for those whose security forms the basis of Montesquieu's political science. Security in goods is inseparable from fear of losing them in the Machiavellian schema. This coupled with other "extraordinary" means of securing gratitude and a long-lived order renders a people unfree on Montesquieu's telling. And so I have tried to show that, preserving the beneficent result of Machiavelli's departure from all who preceded him (excusing acquisitiveness as a thing most "natural and ordinary"), Montesquieu moves politically to delete the fear associated with Machiavelli's politics. Machiavelli's Rome thus gives way to a new Rome, to Montesquieu's England, where Machiavelli's executive as executioner is rendered nearly "invisible and null" (SL XI.6). Here is an order, as I intimated, that mirrors in its passionate effects those of the commercial spirit. For once virtue as self-renunciation is renounced, and once individuals are made safe from expressions of Machiavellian *virtù*, there are in place the ideal conditions for the flourishing of ordinary acquisitiveness.

If one were to turn to the chapter of *The Spirit of Laws* that describes the free constitution's passionate reality, he would find that the constitution sparks in citizens an "ardor for work" and an "ardor for enriching" themselves (SL XIX.27). He would find that the free constitution effects such passions because it removes "arbitrary power," which makes individuals lazy and denies them "nature's rewards" (SL XIII.2, XI.6, XIX.27; *Persian Letters*, XIX, CVI). Suffice it to note in closing that "Machiavellianism" is the name Montesquieu gives to "arbitrary power" and that its "great strokes of authority" are addressed in *The Spirit of Laws* by means always oriented to the desire to acquire that Machiavelli unleashed but then abused. On behalf of ordinary acquisitiveness, Montesquieu turns the glory seeker's greatest champion against himself. This is Montesquieu's (anti-)Machiavellianism.

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