

Montesquieu

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Born: January 18, 1689 in Bordeaux, France

Died: February 10, 1755 in Paris, France

Nationality: French

Occupation: Philosopher

The French jurist, satirist, and political and social philosopher Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755), was the first of the great French men of letters associated with the Enlightenment.

To understand the Baron de Montesquieu, one must look back to the age of Louis XIV. During his long reign, Louis XIV had attempted to assert the absolute authority of the Crown over all aspects of French life and to make France supreme in Europe. Although the Grand Monarch achieved success in many of his endeavors, both his attempt to impose cultural and religious unity and his unsuccessful wars provoked sharp reactions that continued throughout the eighteenth century. It is within this milieu that Montesquieu must be understood.

Montesquieu was born Charles Louis de Secondat on January 18, 1689, at the castle of La Brède near Bordeaux. His father, Jacques de Secondat, was a soldier with a long noble ancestry, and his mother, Marie Françoise de Pesnel, who died when Montesquieu was seven, was an heiress who eventually brought the barony of La Brède to the Secondat family. As was customary, the young Montesquieu spent the early years of his life among the peasants in the village of La Brède. The influence of this period remained with Montesquieu, showing itself in his deep attachment to the soil and in his rustic Gascon accent.

In 1700 Montesquieu was sent to the Oratorian Collège de Juilly, at Meaux, where he received a progressive education. Returning to Bordeaux in 1705 to study law, he was admitted to practice before the Bordeaux Parlement in 1708. The next five years were spent in Paris, continuing his studies. During this period, he developed an intense dislike for the style of life of the capital, which he later expressed in his *Persian Letters*. In 1715 he married Jeanne de Lartigue, a Protestant, who brought him a large dowry. He was also elected to the Academy of Bordeaux. The following year, on the death of his uncle, Jean Baptiste, he inherited the barony of Montesquieu and the presidency of the Bordeaux Parlement.

Scholarly and Literary Career

Montesquieu had no great enthusiasm for law as a profession. He was much more interested in the spirit that lay behind law, that is, the meaning, development, and variations of established laws and their relationship to customs and history. It is from this interest that his greatest work, *The Spirit of the Laws*, developed. To free himself to continue his scholarly interests, Montesquieu took little concern in the routine of the Bordeaux Parlement and eventually sold his office as president in 1721.

Montesquieu's early works were concerned with what would now be termed biological investigations. Montesquieu's interest in the effect of environment on men emerged from these studies. During this same period, he devoted much time to reading highly popular travel literature, including the newly translated *Arabian Nights* and Morana's *Spy of the Great Mogul in the Courts of the Christian Prince*. The combination of this reading and Montesquieu's own critical attitude toward contemporary manners led him to write the first of his great works, *The Persian Letters*.

The Persian Letters (1721) sparkled with wit and satirical irony, but hidden beneath its deft irreverence was a fierce and biting critical view of European civilization and manners. The work takes the form of letters to families and friends at home from three Persians traveling in Europe. Their letters are commentaries on what they see in the West. Montesquieu endowed his travelers with the foreign, commonsense understanding necessary to effectively

criticize European (French) customs and institutions, yet he also gave his Persians the foibles and weaknesses necessary to make his readers recognize their own weaknesses. All facets of European life were criticized. Louis XIV was "a great magician;" the Pope "an old idol worshiped out of habit;" great nobles achieved their status by sitting on chairs and possessing ancestors, debts, and pensions. Beneath the wit was the message that society endures only on the basis of virtue and justice, which is rooted in the necessity of human cooperation and tolerance.

Although the *Letters* was published anonymously, it was quickly recognized as the work of Montesquieu and won for him the acclaim of the public and the displeasure of the regent, Cardinal André Fleury, who held up Montesquieu's induction into the French Academy until 1728. In the same year, Montesquieu began the first of his extensive tours of Europe, which brought him from Italy to Holland to England. (He was elected to the Royal Society of the latter.) After his return to Bordeaux in 1731, Montesquieu began his study of the history of Rome. By 1734 he had finished his *Considerations on the Causes of the Grandeur of Rome and Its Decline*. Though less well received than *The Persian Letters*--Voltaire referred to it as less a book than an ingenious table of contents--the work was less a history than an attempt to get behind history to the general secular causes of events.

According to Montesquieu, Rome achieved greatness because of the martial virtues of its citizens and the flexibility of its institutions, which could be modified to correct political and social abuses. Rome's failure to maintain these characteristics once it acquired an empire marked the beginning of its decline. The development of imperial despotism, epicurean tastes, and the rejection of commerce only hastened the decline of Roman grandeur. Montesquieu's history may not have been scientific in the modern sense, but despite the criticism leveled against it, it was his search for general causal factors that helped to lay the basis for the secularization of historical studies.

The Spirit of the Laws

Fourteen years after his study of Rome, Montesquieu brought his search for the general laws active in society and history to its completion in his greatest work. Published in 1748, *The Spirit of the Laws* was not an analysis of law but an investigation of the environmental and social relationships that lie behind the laws of civilized society. Combining the traditions of customary law with those of the modern theories of natural law, Montesquieu redefined law as "the necessary relationships which derive from the nature of things." Laws, and their most basic political expression, government, thus became a relative relationship between a people's physical environment and their social needs and traditions. Although the basic substance of laws--"reason in action"--remained generally the same under all circumstances, their concrete expression varies according to time and place. Laws "must be adapted to each peoples."

Montesquieu's work was an attempt to study the process of adaptation. Thus, the diversity of laws was viewed as natural and desirable. The best legislator was one who pragmatically adjusted law to the physical and social conditions confronting him. Within this framework Montesquieu defined the basic types of government, identified the dominant virtues associated with each, and stated his most widely known concept of the balance of powers as the best means of establishing and preserving liberty.

An aspect of *The Spirit of the Laws* that has often been overlooked by its commentators is its role in the controversy over the legal rights of the autonomous groups in France following the death of Louis XIV. The last five books are an analysis of medieval French history, designed to prove that to protect the liberties of the nation and the inviolability of the law, autonomous judicial bodies--the *parlements* of France--possessed independent or "intermediary" powers to thwart the natural despotic tendencies of an absolute monarchy. This aspect of the work helped to lay the basis of the eighteenth-century movement for constitutionalism, which culminated in the Revolution of 1789. In this sense, Montesquieu's most fundamental thesis may be viewed as an attempt to indicate the necessity of judicial review. *The Spirit of the Laws* was immediately acclaimed as one of the great works of French literature.

Following the completion of his work, Montesquieu, who was going blind, went into semiretirement at La Brède. He died on February 10, 1755, during a trip to Paris.

Further Readings

- The best biography is Robert Shackleton, *Montesquieu: A Critical Biography* (1961). Montesquieu's thought is discussed in Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (1951); John P. Plamenatz, *Man and Society: Political and Social Theory*, vol. 2 (1963); and W. G. Runciman, *Social Science and Political Theory* (1963).

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