Europe (in Theory)
Dainotto, Roberto M.
Published by Duke University Press

Dainotto, Roberto M.
Europe (in Theory).

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/65107

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2290185
Is Europe but a category effectuated by Montesquieu’s reflection?
—JEAN GOLDZINK, “Montesquieu et l’Europe”

“The concept of Europe must have first been formed as an antithesis to that which is not Europe” and “the first opposition between Europe and something that is not Europe . . . is . . . Asia”—Federico Chabod’s pronouncement, reported in the previous chapter along with Samuel Huntington’s and Bernard Lewis’s insistence that Europe’s cultural identity is fundamentally opposed to Islam and historically formed against its threat, still forms an integral part of today’s theories of Europe. According to such theories (summarized by Bugge), Europe is the antithesis of what Jean-Marc Moura calls “the Orient”—a “vague” and “imaginary place” that refers indifferently to any one of “three areas of an undefined geography that subsume the notion of the Orient: Asia; the Mediterranean and Islamic territories; and the space of Byzantine Christianity” (14).

Arguably such theories of European identity as the antithesis to the Orient proceed from philosophical theories of identity based on “the opposition of the I and the ‘other’ by which the I knows itself” (Habermas 145). In other words, since identity is always difficult to establish in isolation, everybody and everything, “including Europe,” as Peter Rietbergen writes in Europe: A Cultural History, “exists only by virtue of its contrast or its opposite” (xxi). Accordingly, Roger Ballard’s “Islam and the Construction of Europe,” starting from the assumption that European identity is not “a self-evident fact of nature” and thus impossible to maintain per se, concludes that only “the disjunction between Christianity and Islam” (20) and the opposition between the two can give Europe the possibility to know itself as “I” (against “them”). Similarly, François Hartog locates the Greek foundations of the idea of Europe in the Persian Wars: “The Persian Wars gave a meaning [to Europe], by
providing it with an antithetical figure: that of the Persian” (20). Of the same opinion is Michel Foucault: “In the universality of Western ratio there is one dividing line, which is the Orient” (Histoire de la folie iv). Massimo Cacciari reaches the same conclusion: “[Europe] emerges, first of all, from the contrast between the irreducible archipelago of the [Greek] póleis . . . and the powerful kingdom of the [Persians]” (Geofilosofia 15). If one adds to all this Silvio Berlusconi’s distinction between free Europe and enslaved Islam, Oriana Fallaci’s discrimination between Western culture and Eastern barbarity, and the endless eu discussions about the Europeanness or non-Europeanness of “Asiatic” Turkey—well, you get the point.

Before I hear Eurocentric, let me notice that even scholars from a less Europeanist school than the ones just cited seem to take the figural antithesis Europe-Asia for granted. Once again, the starting assumption (stated this time by Edward Said in Orientalism) is that “the construction of identity . . . involves establishing opposites and ‘others’” (45); ergo, Europe, in order to imagine and theorize its own identity, has “to polarize the distinction” (46) between Western and Oriental, European and Arab, or us and them: in sum, “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient” (3). Ditto for Abdel Malek, who accuses Europe of constituting itself as a subject by constructing the Orient as its own demonic object. or negative Other (107).

Disjunction, contrast, contraposition, opposition, antithesis, polarization: these are the figures that crop up, since Chabod, in reflections on Europe. The consensus is such that one can hardly resist the temptation of being a bit skeptical about all of this. The problem is that this rhetorical paradigm’s canonical status seems to prevent us from seeing the question of Europe’s self-formation in any other thinkable way. The present chapter intends, then, to test one hypothesis, namely, that the Europe-versus-Orient paradigm may be overlooking a supplementary and modern genesis of Europe. In the same eighteenth century in which the idea of Europe seems to solidify, and in which Orientalism, as Said has discussed, is established as an academic discipline, Europe starts conceiving a new logic for self-definition that renders the Other superfluous. This new logic, which grows under the eighteenth-century economic imperative of Europe’s self-reliance (Bassand), and which culminates in Hegel’s “dialectic of the same” (Descombes), forms an integral part of the much discussed European “dream of a full . . . clos[ure] of history: the suppression of contradiction and difference” (Derrida,
Grammatology 115): it coincides with Eurocentrism, in other words, understood as the assumption “that one can explain Europe without looking at [the rest of the world]” (Jubran 233). Around the eighteenth century there seems to arise a new desire, within European theory, to concoct an idea of Europe as “complete knowledge of itself” (Berthold-Bond 15). No Other is needed in such a novel fable of identity: exotic difference is, instead, “occluded” (Dussel, “Eurocentrism” 65), translated, and replaced by one contained within Europe itself.

In order for European theory to dispense of the absolute Other, a different rhetoric of antithesis between what Europe is (identity) and what it is not (difference) must, nonetheless, be organized. Difference has to be translated from the radical Other onto a negative part, or moment, of the European self. In Orientalism, Edward Said already alluded to such a translation when he mentioned European theory’s “domestication” (4) and “encompassing” (65) of the Oriental other. Said’s interpreters have usually taken this to mean that Orientalism as an academic discipline domesticated the otherwise untamable Orient to European knowledge and colonial designs. It seems to me, however, that Said was hinting at a supplementary kind of domestication when he suggested, for example—admittedly en passant—that “the Oriental was linked [by European anthropology] to elements in Western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor)” (207). If such “elements of Western society” were made to represent the same characteristics as the Orient, it can then be argued that one was the translation of the other: Europe, in the context described by Said, could fathom its identity not only by opposing itself to the Orient but by matching itself against those internal elements of Western society.

What needs to be added to Said’s hint is that these deviant elements of Western society are not only molded in the image of the Oriental but, also, geographically determined: the deviant, the internal Other of Europe, is a southerner (see Petraccone). As Italy had been consistently represented in the European thought of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as Europe’s backward south (Moe 13–36), it is not surprising to see that Italy soon became the hotbed for more or less scientific discussions trying to distinguish, at least, a good and European Italy—a northern one—from a bad and barbaric one—the south. If Orientalism had canonized the Oriental as “lethargic” (Said, Orientalism 39) and led by a “need for vengeance that overrides everything” (49), Cesare Lombroso, the patriotic anthropologist from the northern Italian city of Verona,
observed southern Calabria in 1862 as a “barbaric” place where “sloth was hypostatized as merit, vengefulness as system” (89). Just as Orientalism had canonized the Orient as a place of backwardness representing “a distant European past” (Said, Orientalism 85) and the Oriental as an epiphany of “primitiveness . . . [that] had not been subject to the ordinary processes of history” (230), so Lombroso’s southerner served as the example of an “atavist primitiveness . . . the effect of a hindered development, in the collective moral sense, resulting in the permanence of a barbaric stage” (514).

Lombroso had made the discovery of southern “atavism” in 1870, when he had examined the cranium of Giuseppe Vilella, a Calabrese peasant and brigand by race—no matter that the authorities had always missed the chance to suspect him of anything.∞

Alfredo Niceforo, a Sicilian member of the Roman Anthropological Society and of the Italian Society of Geography, could not but internalize the theory and confirm: the south “has been atrophied on the path to civilization and has conserved moral ideas of primitive societies; men thus present an individual psychic atavism, and the entire region shows forms of social atavism” (Delinquenza 41). Niceforo could then distinguish within Italy itself between a properly “European” and a “Mediterranean” race. The south was a deficiency of Europeanness; put differently, it was its past. Niceforo’s reviewer for the daily Il Secolo asked, then, rhetorically: “Isn’t it like in a nightmare? Isn’t it shocking to read that habits typical of Arab tribes before Mohammed are still alive today in some regions of Italy? Isn’t it shocking to find that such behavior is enacted not by Tuaregs and Bedouins, but by Italian citizens?” (qtd. in Petracccone 164).≤

The atavism of the south—a latitude blocked “within ideas and sentiments that belong to the European civilization of the past” (Niceforo, Italia 38)—was thus largely translated by the anthropology of Lombroso and his descendants from the original texts of Orientalism: in both scientific and popular literature (see Dickie 100–119), the Orient was the south, and Europe’s Other was to be found, as in a nightmare, within Europe’s own borders. The editorial introduction to the first issue of the Revue de l’Orient, 1843, had already prepared the context for such translation: “Our Orient comprehends the European countries of the Mediterranean” (Hugo 8). What Italian anthropology could contribute to the Revue’s translation was a positivist explanation of such southern difference: “the influence of climate,” had determined Lombroso (42);
“northern and southern climate,” had agreed the gymnast of criminology Enrico Ferri, because “in the northern climate man’s stubborn confrontation with an ungenerous nature forces individuals and generations to an endless intellectual and physical exercise. Hence the development of a robust character, which will make this man less artistic than the pleasure-seeking southerner, but stronger because made of iron” (Delitti 48).

Yet neither Orientalism nor anthropology lay at the origin of such a domestication of the antithesis of Europe into Europe’s own south. The cultural climate for this reorientation of Europe’s identity had already been set in 1737, in a dark laboratory of the rue Margaux, in Bordeaux, France, where the carcass of a sheep was being sacrificed at the altar of Europe’s resurgent science of climatology.

The Silence of the Sheep: Climate (in Theory)

Let your lips, proposing a hypothesis
Not know about the hand faking the experiment.
—CZESLAW MILOSZ, “Child of Europe”

It all began when Monsieur le President of the Academy of Bordeaux, Charles Louis de Secondat, the baron of Montesquieu and member of the up-and-coming noblesse de robe (nobility attained by office) with something always to prove to an older feudal nobility, “undertook experiments, described in De l’Esprit des Lois, on a sheep’s tongue under the microscope with the aim of discovering its reactions to changes in temperature” (Shackleton, Montesquieu 305–6):

I have observed the outermost part of a sheep’s tongue, where, to the naked eye, it seems covered with papillae . . . I froze the half of this tongue, and, observing it with the naked eye, I found the papillae considerably diminished: even some rows of them were sunk into their sheath. I examined the outermost part with the microscope, and perceived no pyramids. As I defrosted the half of the tongue, the papillae seemed to rise, and under the microscope I could see the glands beginning to reappear. (Montesquieu, Oeuvres 2:476)

The episode is considered by Montesquieu’s biographer, who does not seem to stomach well the gothic odors of the dissecting room, as an
example of the somewhat naive but marginal scientific observations that Montesquieu was undertaking while preparing *De l’esprit des lois*. For Shackleton, Montesquieu’s analytic interest in the effects of heat and cold on physical bodies was secondary in his research, and by no means meant to suggest “the paramountcy of climate” (Shackleton, *Montesquieu* 317) as a determining factor of his science of the body politic. No doubt, Shackleton is right. Yet the kind of scientific experiment that Montesquieu was concocting in the rue Margaux went clearly beyond a naive approach to the physical sciences and was to prepare, in fact, the greatest and most disingenuous rhetorical *demonstratio* for the hypothesis of Europe that Montesquieu was at that point working to articulate.

Montesquieu’s critical experiment was moved, more than by science, by a singular sociological mysticism: the conviction, in other words, that the tongue of the sheep could speak, through the president’s shamanic powers of observation, the whole complexity of social relations in the world. In that tongue, Montesquieu had found the grail, the philosopher’s stone—the key to it all. In it was hidden the secret principle that, once revealed, could tell humankind “what gives a specific character to a nation or a certain spirit to one particular individual; what modifies a whole sex and what affects a single man; what forms the genius of societies and the genius of a single person at the same time” (Montesquieu, *Oeuvres* 2:39). The sheep’s tongue was a little *système du monde*, a microcosm that contained, in itself, the secret essence of all—a particular case, in other words, that represented a more general and universal law: “I have posed the principles,” Montesquieu had announced in the preface to the *Spirit*, “and I have seen the particular case tied with another law, or depending on another, more general law” (*Oeuvres* 2:229).

A law was, in Montesquieu’s understanding of the word, a relation (*un rapport*) between things. These relations were humanly perceived, rather than mere facts of nature: “The law, in general, is human reason, insofar as reason governs all the people on earth” (*Oeuvres* 2:237). Social relations, which constitute the positive laws that relate individual bodies to the general political body of a nation, were in turn predetermined by *natural* relations and natural laws: “They [positive laws] must be relative to the *physics* of the country: to the frigid, or hot, or temperate climate” (*Oeuvres* 2:238; original emphasis). In this metatheory of the law, in other words, the relation between physical/climatological realities and political formations was not a casual but a necessary one (“They *must* be relative”). An analysis of social relations had then to begin, necessarily,
from an analysis of physical rapports, that is to say, from an analysis of the relationship “between a body in motion and another body” (Montesquieu, *Oeuvres* 2:233). The problem, since at least Galileo Galilei, had been how to make those bodies—“man as a physical being” (Montesquieu, *Oeuvres* 2:234)—communicate their laws, so as to decipher the book of nature, the secret, perhaps divine, language of mute things. What the experiment of the tongue, then, signified for Montesquieu was the possibility of finally giving a tongue to these silent bodies: to have them speak, through the medium of his presidential observations, their otherwise unuttered natural laws that lay at the very basis of any positive ones.

What the tongue spoke to Montesquieu was one of those “beautiful, grand, and simple ideas, quite worthy of the majesty of nature” that the president had always assumed distinguished the findings of “us, the moderns” from the forgettable ones of the ancients (Montesquieu, *Oeuvres* 1:33). Assuming those papillae were the organs of taste through which the sheep (a gourmand one at that) enjoyed her food, Montesquieu could therefore deduce that all pleasures, like the particular one of taste, had to be correlated to climate. The colder the temperature, the smaller becomes the papilla—and the lesser is the capacity to taste. The warmer the environment gets, the larger grows the papilla—and so the pleasure of taste reaches its heights: “This observation [of the sheep’s tongue] confirms what I have been saying, that in cold countries . . . one has little sensibility to pleasure; in temperate countries, one has more; in warm countries, their sensibility is exquisite. As climates are distinguished by degrees of latitude, we might distinguish them also in some measure by those of sensibility” (Montesquieu, *Oeuvres* 2:476).

What this natural law meant for the establishment of human, positive, and social laws was that “in warm climates,” where a sensibility for pleasures is extreme, “despotic power generally prevails” (Montesquieu, *Oeuvres* 2:297). An extreme drive toward pleasure engenders an extreme drive to satisfy it: “More lively passions multiply crimes that will satisfy those same passions” (2:477). Cold climates are climates of cooperation between men: their union is their strength, and the consciousness of their strength makes them courageous. Warm climates, instead, are climates of fear: they engender either abuses or cowardice. In warm climates, therefore, only despotism, the law of the strongest capable of instilling fear in all others, can rule: “One should therefore not be
surprised if the cowardice of the peoples of warm climates has almost always made them slaves, whereas the courage of the peoples of cold climates has kept them free. It is an effect that derives from its natural cause” (2:523).

At this point, pour ainsi dire, it does not matter if the adequate understanding of societies can be found in the examination of men or in the observation of a sheep’s tongue; the conclusion is one and the same: “One can conclude that climate contributes infinitely to modify the spirit” (2:44). Humankind, like the tongue, is one and the same everywhere and under every climate on earth; but heat and cold have different effects on otherwise equal bodies. Cold tightens the pores. All the vigor that remains inside the body produces a “more vigorous” and courageous race of men. Heat, on the contrary, dilates the pores, so that vigor escapes. We have, then, the feeble, cowardly, vengeful, lazy, and passive character unable to fight for his or her freedom that Montesquieu swears to have found in the hot climates: “The heat of the climate may be so excessive as to deprive the body of all vigor and strength. The faintness is therefore communicated to the mind; there is no curiosity, no noble enterprise, no generosity of sentiment; the inclinations are all passive; indolence constitutes the utmost happiness; scarcely any punishment is so severe as mental employment; and slavery is more tolerable than the force and vigor of mind that would be necessary for human conduct” (2:477).

Climatology was certainly not a new theory for Montesquieu (see Shackleton, Montesquieu 302–19). Jean Bodin’s La méthode de l’histoire (1566) and La république (1576), which had set forth a theory of the effect of climate on society and government, were among Montesquieu’s regularly consulted books. In the “Réflexions sur la monarchie universelle” (1734), climatology had already been mentioned as a providential engine of human history that had saved many times Germans and Gauls from the Roman hordes: “It is very difficult for nations of the South to conquer those of the North, and all Histories prove that. Southern Nations find in the North an unconquerable enemy: climate” (Montesquieu, Oeuvres 2:28). The only enemy of the otherwise proud nations of the north remains climate itself: “The Roman historians have constantly observed that the people of the North, almost unconquerable in their countries, were no longer such when they were in warmer countries” (1:1354). Also, in the “Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des
romains et de leur décadence,” written in the same year, climate had explained such disparate social “facts” as the Macedonians’ military prowess in war (2:94) or the fecundity of Oriental women (2:187).

By the time he had jotted down the preparatory notes for *De l’esprit des lois*, Montesquieu was quite certain that a “temperate climate,” as the Aristotelian good middle between extreme heat and excessive cold, was conducive to progress and civilization (Montesquieu, *Oeuvres* 2:1075). Aristotle himself, for his part, had never talked of a *temperate* climate, when, revisiting Hippocrates’ climatology in the seventh book of the *Politics*, he had opened the road for Montesquieu’s theory of the social implications of temperature: “The nations in cold regions, particularly in Europe, are full of [courage] . . . which is why they continue to be comparatively free . . . . By contrast, those in Asia . . . lack [courage]; which is why they continue to be ruled and enslaved (Aristotle, *Politics* 7.7).

After Aristotle and before Montesquieu, however, the science of climatology had managed to move the commonplace of the courageous nation from an unqualified “cold” region to a more “temperate” zone. Ibn Khaldun, writing around 1377, had presented not the cold, but the temperate zones of the Mediterranean (today’s Maghreb, Middle East, and southern Europe) as the most perfect for the constitution of societies.

Europe (in Theory) discusses the nineteenth-century recuperation of Ibn Khaldun’s climatology (and of the Mediterranean as a locus of perfection) in chapter 5. In eighteenth-century France, however, Montesquieu does not want the Mediterranean, but rather a putatively northern France, to be identified with the perfection of what is temperate and therefore not excessive but just. It is then very likely, and it has been suggested (for instance by Gates) that Montesquieu knew of Ibn Khaldun’s climatology, which had become popular in France since the publication of Jean-Baptiste Chardin’s *Voyages en Perse et autres lieux de l’Orient* in 1680. The fact that Montesquieu never mentions Ibn Khaldun is then highly significant: Montesquieu’s temperate (climatically and therefore politically) zone is not Ibn Khaldun’s Mediterranean, but a European north comprising England, Holland, Germany, Belgium, and France. North of this temperate north was for Montesquieu the *excessive* cold of Siberia and Lapland, which reduced people to a state of savagery. South of it was exactly Ibn Khaldun’s Mediterranean, demoted to a hot, dry place. In a way, both the extremely cold north of Lapland and Siberia and the excessively hot south of Spain and Italy produced a
similar breed of humans: savage, non-European, and with a brown skin (see Duchet 254–65).

Rather than from Ibn Khaldun, Montesquieu therefore inherits the notion of a temperate climate directly from Jean Bodin, who, in the République, had divided the world into a colder north inhabited by rude and “dirty” peoples, a hotter south inhabited by cunning and malicious ones, and a temperate “Europe” with France at its center (Carravetta 42). Montesquieu, at first glance, seemed then to translate Aristotle’s seventh book of Politics almost word by word: “It is not surprising that the cowardice of the people of hot climates has almost constantly rendered them slaves, and that the courage of the people of cold climates has kept them free” (Oeuvres 2:523). But his move of the zone of perfection from Aristotle’s (and Ibn Khaldun’s) Mediterranean to a temperate north was full of strategic significance: “You will find, in the climates of the north, peoples who have few vices, many virtues, and much sincerity and candor. As you move toward the countries of the south, you will believe you have moved away from morality itself” (2:477).

Plenty has been written, since, about Montesquieu’s climatological politics and about his spatial logic of difference. While some scholars have insisted on Montesquieu’s “environmental determinism” (Sprout and Sprout 50) and on the way “physical environment, especially climate, impinges upon human character and political institutions” (Shklar 12), others have minimized the importance of climate in Montesquieu’s politics by stressing instead the primacy of social factors and moral causes (e.g., Shackleton, Montesquieu 317) or by restricting the influence of geographical factors to the limits of a “qualified determinism” (Richter 134). Although climate is certainly not the one and only cause that Montesquieu singles out, it seems problematic, on the other hand, to dismiss or minimize it excessively after Montesquieu himself wrote, for instance, that “it is the different needs depending on different climates that have formed different ways of living; and these different ways of living have formed the different kinds of laws” (Oeuvres 2:483–84); or that “it is climate that decides [the relations between the sexes]” (2:517). It may be that in order to save the “father” of political science from a determinism that is less credible to us, a complete “emancipation [of political theory] from the environment, has been accomplished by [some] critics with too much ease” (Kriesel 566).

At any rate, despite differing interpretations regarding the importance of climate in Montesquieu, critics seem to agree that the goal of De
**l’esprit des lois** was to theorize European freedom against Asiatic despotism (see, for example, Chabod 106). Franco Venturi, minimizing the importance of climate in his old but still pertinent essay entitled “Oriental Despotism,” takes *De l’esprit des lois* as the pivotal text that canonized the antithesis Europe-Orient in a modern context: “Synthesizing the political wisdom of past ages,” says Venturi, Montesquieu moved away from a narrowly political definition of despotism which claimed that “it is only governments which are despotic” toward a modern one that assumed that “society may be so too” (134). Differently put, despotism is not the product of political systems, but of general social conditions, or “culture” (Abrahamian 4). For Venturi, Oriental despotism and European freedom were, then, not the conditions of specific forms of authority, but political drives embedded in the structure itself—culture, morality, systems of belief—of Oriental and European societies. Perry Anderson gives instead significant importance to climate and geography. Yet he comes to the same conclusion as Venturi: “Montesquieu’s declared principle of explanation for the differential character of European and Asian States was, of course, geographical: climate and topography determined their separate destinies” (465).

In truth, the antithesis Europe-Orient was a well-established commonplace in Montesquieu’s times (see, for example, Longino). Since at least 1704, when Antoine Galland had translated *The Thousand and One Nights* into French, the Orient—a concept that hardly differentiated between India, Persia, and Arabia (Mariani Zini 20n3)—had cohered into popular imagination as the “Other” place to everyday France. For good and for bad, the Orient was, once again, the antithesis of modern Europe, which had, in turn, Paris at its center: this was the sure lesson drawn from reading the endless number of Galland’s imitators—from François Pétis de la Croix’s *Mille et un jour* (1710–1812), to Charles de Fieux, Chevalier de Mouhy, who rewrote Marguerite de Navarre’s *Héptaméron* in 1740 as *Les milles et une faveurs*. The more the French genius prided itself for being utterly and Cartesianly reasonable, the more it needed, it seems, to imagine an Orient of magic, flying carpets, and genies in the bottle. Even Voltaire (*Vision de Babouc*, 1746; *Bababek et les fakirs*, 1750) and Diderot (*L’oiseaux blanc*, 1748; *Les bijoux indiscrets*, 1748), or Montesquieu himself with the *Lettres persanes* (1721), would put aside reason for a while and indulge instead in the pleasures of the “Other” life in the east.

The Orient as the unreasonable antithesis to the (French) West was the
horizon of expectations against which *De l’esprit des lois* was, and still largely is, interpreted. Nicolas Antoine Boulanger, in the *Recherches sur les origines du despotisme orientale* of 1761, had soon noticed in Montesquieu a paradigmatic distinction between Europe and the east. Also, Abraham Hyacinte Anquetil-Duperron, in a spirited defense of his beloved Asia printed as *Législation orientale* (1778), had accused Montesquieu of creating stereotypes of Asia that could only serve the colonial interests of Europe. The *philosophes* themselves, led by Voltaire, had come to the same conclusion, while accepting that Montesquieu’s text was in fact the theorization of the Europe-Asia difference.

What seems to be lost in this kind of interpretation, however, is nothing less than the *modernity* of Montesquieu’s science of politics—the way in which climatology is slowly but surely abandoning Aristotle’s longitudinal difference and preparing instead the modern and romantic latitudinal distinctions that Madame de Staël would set, in the year 1800, between two European cultures: one “that come from the south,” and one “that descend from the north” (*Littérature* 203). To begin with, Montesquieu could not care less about Aristotle—or, for that matter, about the authority of the ancients in general. They did not know better, and, at best, they wrote “without knowing what they said” (Montesquieu, *Oeuvres* 2:43). So while *De l’esprit des lois* could appear to be following Aristotle and the ancients in its identification of climate as the natural cause that divides free and progressive nations from despotic and backward ones, the conclusion of book 17, chapter 2, announced an unarguably modern thesis: it is not in the west, but “in the climates of the north” that peoples have “few vices, many virtues”; and it is not in the east, but in “the countries of the south” that one finds oneself “away from morality itself.”

What is immediately apparent here is that the old discussion between freedom (Europe) and despotism (Asia) has been translated into a modern, latitudinal rhetoric of north and south. Heat and cold, rather than physical geographies fixed in the reality of Aristotle’s Greece and Persia, have become for Montesquieu two rhetorical commonplaces that can be translated at will in order to articulate and unfold a new idea of Europe.

“Europe,” writes Montesquieu, “has come to such a high degree of power, that history cannot compare it to anything else” (*Oeuvres* 2:644). The Oriental—once the Persian, later the Muslim and the Turk—has ceased to represent any menace at all. By 1782, in fact, his fundamentally comic role in the unfolding of modern European history will be can-
onized by young Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. It is consequently useless to judge Europe against Asia and the East in 1748: ideally, if not geographically (see the discussion on Eurasia in chapter 1), “Europe is separated from the rest of the world” (Montesquieu, *Oeuvres* 2:710). This does not mean that Europe can now define itself without a confrontation with a negative Other: it means, rather, that since “one finds the same difference within Europe” (2:481), a modern theory of Europe can now dispense with any comparison “to anything else” and focus instead on this internal difference within Europe. It is not only in Asia, after all, “but in the south of Europe that laws do exactly the contrary” of what European laws ought to do (2:481). And it is not only in Asia that freedom, constitutive of Europe according to Aristotle, is negated; freedom, alas, is “never to be seen in the southern climates” of Europe itself (2:526; emphasis mine).

Interlude: A Theory of Postcolonialism

The ordinary effect of colonies is to weaken the colonizing country, without increasing the population of the colonized one. —CHARLES DE SECONDAT MONDESQUIEU, *Lettres Persanes*

If Montesquieu’s “modernity” was, in G. Bonno’s words, the attempt to theorize “a moment in which European hegemony was being extended all over the world” (289), it must be noticed that such theorization followed one very firm assumption: that such an extension of Europe all over the world had now to be balanced by a new centrifugal movement—by a return to Europe. Montesquieu’s eagerness to declare colonialism a closed chapter in the history of Europe—especially after the failures of Colbertism5—bears directly on his attempt to make of Europe a self-contained system in which difference (north and south) is represented as an internal dialectic of the same. The logic of colonial expansion, from its very outset, runs counter to the logic of *De l’esprit des lois*: if laws are proper to one specific locale (climate and geography) and to one people’s sense of morality (culture), colonialism then poses the problem, discussed for instance in book 19, of how to establish an alien colonial rule in a place that is naturally disinclined to it (Montesquieu, *Oeuvres* 2:574–83).6 The *Lettres persanes* had already warned Europe that such a colonial effort was in fact to weaken the conquering country; the same point had
been advanced, a propos the decline of Spain, in the “Considérations sur les richesses de l’Espagne” (ca. 1728); and the “Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des romains” had condemned “the folly of conquering new territories in a movement of extension that brings the conqueror nothing but the illusion of power and the reality of weakness” (Volpilhac-Augé 51). It was now De l’esprit des lois that dramatized the need for an abandonment of colonialism—by producing, for one, a theory of Europe as complete knowledge of itself, and which no longer wishes to find its Other in any faraway colony or land.

Montesquieu’s rationale for declaring the age of global conquest and expansion over was modern in the most businesslike sense of the word: De l’esprit des lois, as David Carrithers suggests, “considered the prioritization of commerce [as] the chief distinguishing feature of modernity” (“Introduction” 18). Not only was colonialism hindering the free circulation of goods and capitals by imposing such “unnatural” regulations as the colonial power’s exclusive right of negotiation with the colonies (Montesquieu, Oeuvres 2:643). Worse, colonialism was prone to confuse the end (commerce) with the means (war of conquest). A criticism of colonial expansionism began, then, in the name of business, with a consideration of the commercial failure of the most illustrious of colonial conquests—the Spanish one of the Americas. The Spaniards—a backward southern nation—certainly did not know better the principles of modern commerce: “The Spaniards considered these newly discovered lands as the subject of conquest; while others, more refined in their views, found them to be the proper subjects of commerce” (Montesquieu, Oeuvres 2:643).

Yet the problem was not simply military conquest; what was truly problematic about colonialism was that its conquests of faraway lands were quite difficult to turn into productive commercial enterprises—even for more modern and refined countries than Spain. It is not surprising that for a thinker so interested in geography as Montesquieu was, the problem could be described in spatial terms: simply put, for commerce to be fruitful to European countries, distance had to be taken into account. What worth, then, was the immense gold of the distant Americas? Montesquieu answered with an accountant’s precision:

To extract the gold from the mines, to give it the requisite preparations, and to import it into Europe, must be attended with some certain expense. I will suppose this to be as 1 to 64. When the specie was once
doubled, and consequently became by one-half less precious, the expense was as 2 to 64. Thus the fleets that brought to Spain the same quantity of gold, brought a thing which really was of less value by one-half, though the expenses attending it had been twice as high. If we proceed doubling and doubling, we shall find in this progression the cause of the impotency of the wealth of Spain. (2:646–47)

Compared to the squandering of faraway colonialism, even German and Hungarian mines, though relatively poorer than the American ones, revealed themselves as more useful—“extremely useful,” as it were—than the ones overseas: “Those mines of Germany and Hungary, which produce little more than the expense of working them, are extremely useful. They are found in the principal state; they employ many thousands of men, who there consume their superfluous commodities, and they are properly a manufacture of the country. The mines of Germany and Hungary promote the culture of land; the working of those of Mexico and Peru destroys it” (2:648).

Distrust for the commercial viability of colonialism was only one of the reasons that had led Montesquieu to close Europe’s doors in the face of the entire world. Hygiene was a second one, since at least the days when syphilis had landed in Europe with Columbus’s caravels (2:485). A third was the maximization of productivity that, as the discussion of slavery concluded (2:496–97), was achieved more easily by giving incentives to local salaried laborers (who could in turn buy produced goods and thus increase the wealth of the nation) than by importing slaves from other lands. And a final reason was the troubles of Europe themselves. Too much energy, believed Montesquieu, had been spent thinking about colonialism, and too little trying to solve the most immediate problems of Europe. Such immediate problems were not transcontinental but internal: Europe had certainly come to “such a high degree of power”; but it was also, at the height of its hegemony, profoundly sick at its core: “A new sickness has spread over Europe: has taken our princes, and has made them organize a disproportionate number of soldiers” (2:470). After the endless wars of religion discussed in chapter 1, the war of the Spanish succession was now pitting “one half of Europe against the other half” (1:1356). Sully’s “chimerical” project of perpetual peace, which was to answer, as we have seen in chapter 1, the disunities of the wars of religion, had miserably failed (Pensées number 1482). A new project was now needed, and Montesquieu, unaccustomed to despair,
identified such a project with the modern ethics of the market: “The effect of commerce is to tend toward peace” (Montesquieu, Oeuvres 2:585; also see Rosso). In a modern world, in which successful commerce was not between metropolis and colony but “done mainly between north and south” (Montesquieu, Oeuvres 2:603), a focus on inter-European commerce could suffice to guarantee a perpetual peace between all European nations.

What such a modern project of perpetual peace entailed was the shift from “a model of brutal and ephemeral conquest, [to] a model of organization of an empire [where . . . ] commerce reigned” (Volpilhac-Augé 49). This passage from an old colonial model to a modern and commercial one was for Montesquieu not only an epochal or historical but a geographical one. To move from colonialism to commerce meant, in other words, to move the center of European hegemony from the south to the north. Colonialism had been for Montesquieu the soul of the Roman Empire—of an empire centered on the Mediterranean, that is, that no longer constituted the center (“L’Italie n’est plus au centre”) but only a “corner of the world” (Montesquieu, Oeuvres 1:1380). And colonialism had been the drive of another southern empire—the Spanish one—that had eventually collapsed and was now to be put under the supervision of Europe (“en tutelle dans l’Europe”; see Montesquieu Oeuvres 1:1380, 1382). Commerce, instead, was the new ethics of a protestant north, and of France in particular, the “most powerful nation” (2:375), “heart or even head” of the new Europe (“au milieu d’Europe [France] en étoit le coeur si elle n’en étoit pas la tête” (2:30). If northern nations had engaged in the adventures of colonialism, and even started quarrelling over colonies, Montesquieu now warned them: colonial interests were against their nature, against their modern, protestant, commercial European spirit. Colonialism, in short, would only bring them to disaster.

As climatology had divided Europe into north and south, so did the advent of modern commerce split Europe into two perfectly balanced, antithetical parts:

In Europe there is a kind of balance between the southern and the northern nations. The first have every riches of life, and few wants: the second have many wants, and few riches. To one Nature has given much, and demands little; to the other she has given but little, and demands a lot. The equilibrium is maintained by the laziness of the southern nations,
and by the industry and activity which Nature has given to those in the north. The latter have to work a lot, or else they would lack everything, and degenerate into barbarianism. This has naturalized slavery for the people of the south: as they can easily dispense with riches, they can even more easily dispense with liberty. (Montesquieu, Oeuvres 2:603)

What is crucial here is not so much that southern Europeans could be militarily conquered and enslaved (servitude is, after all, natural in the south), but that north and south formed for Montesquieu a perfect economic system: the south was an immense reservoir of natural riches that existed there in excess; and the north was the center for the industrious manufacture of finished goods. It was the nearby European south, to which “Nature has given much,” which had now to be controlled and exploited by the laborious and progressive northern nations—not the distant Americas, which only yield a return of “2 to 64.”

The logic of excess and industriousness was in fact quite reminiscent of the second of the Two Treatises on Civil Government (1690) in which John Locke had tried to justify the “private dominion” of things against a natural law commanding that “all the fruits [Mother Nature] naturally produces ... belong to mankind in common” (5:115–16). Locke, intent to justify private property as the very institution that distinguished the progressive and “civilized part of mankind” (5:117) from another that was still in “a pattern of the first ages” of Europe (5:151), had claimed that “labour put a distinction between [private] and common” (5:116) and “removed ... [the object] from the state of Nature wherein she was common” to make it “mine” (5:117). Labor, in other words, legitimated property: “Cultivating the earth and having dominion, we see, are joined together” (5:119). Excess was, then, available to appropriation through labor: “As much as any one can make use of to any advantage of life before it spoils, so much he may by his labour fix a property in. Whatever is beyond this is more than his share, and belongs to others” (5:117).

Locke’s theory of property, however, aimed at founding an ethics of colonialism and of legitimating the exploitation of the putatively “vacant places of America” (5:120) by industrious Europe. What Montesquieu now needed was a translation of Locke’s theory of property from a colonial context into one in which “European commerce is done mainly between north and south.” Commerce, in a way, had already realized such a translation. It was a theory of Europe, now, that needed to be conceived to represent adequately the way in which Europe had already
become a system, a complete whole in which its two complementary parts worked in perfect—can we say dialectical?—synergy.

To theorize such a balance of one Europe divided in two, a new theory of identity was needed, and what Elena Russo calls Montesquieu’s “modern psychology” could have certainly been a first step in this direction. Montesquieu’s modern individual, different from the unselfconsciously wholesome one of the ancients, appeared split by an internal contradiction “that tear[s] the modern man apart”: he “conflates the two functions of man and citizen into a single identity” (Russo 115). As a man, this individual was led by nature to satisfy his immediate needs; as a citizen, he was limited by culture to reconcile his satisfaction with the social good. A similar split between nature and culture, in fact, formed the identity and character of Montesquieu’s nations: “There exists, in every nation, a general character. It is produced in two ways: by physical causes which depend upon the climate . . . and by moral causes which are a combination of the laws, religion, habits and manners” (Montesquieu, *Oeuvres* 2:58).

It might not have taken much imagination to the undoubtedly quite imaginative president to translate this paradigm of dialectical identity onto Europe itself. So while he had begun book 5 by listing as an antithesis to Europe all the usual suspects of Orientalism—the Turks, Persia, and the Mongols (2:296)—by the time he got to book 14, Montesquieu had already split Europe into two “functions” of a single identity: a south determined by nature (“away from morality itself”); and a north led instead by a culture of cooperation with the state (“few vices, enough virtues, and much sincerity and frankness”). The antithesis of European freedom, too, had been relocated within Europe’s own south. Europe was *in itself* “torn apart” by two conflated drives—one to liberty, the other to slavery: “It is the peoples of the north who have and always will have a spirit of independence and liberty that is lacking in the peoples of the south” (2:718). The other political climate that Aristotle had imagined in Persia had been now brought within the borders of Europe.

Back to the Tongue

The whole idea of climatology, after all, had come to Montesquieu neither from reading about Asia in the *Politics* nor from thinking of the vanquished and vanished Persian Empire. It had been a more modern
preoccupation—the southbound Grand Tour—that had led Montesquieu to Italy, where the idea of climatology had hit him like a revelation. The rising industry of guide-books and travel memoirs had already warned him about the noxiousness of Italian air:

Returned travelers had often given evil reports of the air of Rome, and guide-books seldom failed to comment on the noxious and even lethal effects of the atmosphere either of the city itself or of the Roman campagna. Rogissart’s *Les Délices de l’Italie*, Misson’s *Nouveau Voyage d’Italie*, and Addison’s *Remarks on several parts of Italy*, all of them known to Montesquieu, cited by him, and possessed by him at La Brede, allude to the unhealthy qualities of the Roman air. Shortly before departing for Italy, he had made the acquaintance of the *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*, by the Abbé Dubos. The learned Abbé asserts the influence of climate on national character. Giving a fairly detailed analysis of its mode of operation. (Shackleton, *Montesquieu* 303)

In 1729, when Montesquieu entered Rome, he was confronted by a scene even more desolate than his readings had prepared him for: the place was “without commerce or industry,” and all was totally opposed to the economic and social logic of what Montesquieu called “the system of Europe” (*Oeuvres* 1:661). In this wasteland, internal but also alien to a European system, Montesquieu was promptly informed by his compatriot Cardinal de Polignac—the same who had explained to the Holy Father the “difference” between France and Italy (“Saint Père, vous ne savez la différence de la France à l’Italie”; 1:667)—of Rome’s distinctly bad weather (“l’intempérie de Rome”; 1:663). Naples’s weather was quite bad too (“l’air n’y est pas des plus sains”; 1:717), and Pozzuoli’s was even worse (“l’air y est très mauvais”), especially after the heat of summer had made it absolutely and unredeemably pestilential (“lorsque le chaleur de l’été . . . l’air doit être empesté”; 1:725).

The voyage south of the European system soon became for Montesquieu a descent into an inferno whose heat was the most proximate secular metonymy reminiscent of the theological flames of hell: at the baths of Pozzuoli, the heat was suffocating (“la chaleur m’ayant presque suffoqué”) and waters were boiling (“une eau bouillante”; 1:725). From the ground, sulfurous smoke exhaled (“une fumée de soufre sort de plusieurs endroits”; 1:726). Not even a miracle could redeem such a place!

Speaking of miracles, the Neapolitans regularly celebrated the one of
San Gennaro, whose blood, preserved in two glass bowls from the time of his martyrdom (he was beheaded in 305), was said to liquefy three times every year—on the first Sunday of May (the anniversary of the translation of his body to Naples from nearby Pozzuoli); on September 19 (the date of the martyrdom); and on December 16 (the date of the eruption of the Vesuvius in 1631). On September 19, 1729, Montesquieu stood among a crowd of ecstatic Neapolitans to witness the liquefaction of the saint’s blood, which the priest had brought from the crypt of the homonymous church to the open square. “Miracle!” howled the crowd. Not so quick, annotated instead Montesquieu, with ethnographic scruple and empirical skepticism, in his diaries. Far from being a miracle, the liquefaction could in fact be easily explained according to the principles of climatology, whose hermeneutic virtues Montesquieu was clearly contemplating already: “I am convinced that all this is the result of temperature change” (Oeuvres 1:728). By bringing the coagulated blood from the cold crypt to the sunny square, the priest, helped only by a providential change in temperature, had caused the “miracle” to happen.

Marginal as this little episode may be in the production of Montesquieu’s oeuvre, it should, at the very least, give us anecdotal proof of how many things, really, climate could explain. Just as it explained the miracle of San Gennaro, it explained the social reality of the south: the unbearable heat of Naples had formed human beings that were “the most miserable in the world,” a people that was “more vulgar and popular than any other” (“bien plus peuple qu’un autre”) (1:729). They were people, in other words, in the sense of a “corrupt people that rarely does great things.” Sure enough, they celebrated, along with their saint, their hero too—Masaniello. But Masaniello wanted to change the government into a republic, start a revolution, and talked of freedom too. Did the people of Naples join him in his fight for liberty? Of course not (1:729): as De l’esprit des lois would later explain, revolution “can seldom be effected without infinite pains and labor, and hardly ever by idle and debauched persons” (2:281). And infinite pains and labor, as we know, can hardly arise in the debauchery of heat.

The palimpsest of Aristotle’s political climatology, which had established the antithesis between a hot and despotic east on the one hand, and a cold and free Europe on the other, was then totally rewritten according to the climatological findings of the Voyages. Already there, Europe had appeared as a continent fractured by a deep latitudinal
divide: “It looks to me that the more northward one moves, the more easily one finds people who are resilient to travails; the further one moves towards the hot countries of the south, one finds flaccid bodies and a looser spirit” (Montesquieu, *Oeuvres* 2:701–2).

The task of *De l’esprit des lois* was, then, to theorize, after the empirical observations of the Italian *Voyages*, a political science of the north-south difference. The climatic hell of the *Voyages* was to become, in *De l’esprit des lois*, the very natural cause for the positive institution of cultural, political, moral, and even religious commonplaces of the south’s negativity:

When the Christian religion, two centuries ago, became unhappily divided into Catholic and Protestant, the people of the north embraced the Protestant, and those of the south adhered still to the Catholic. The reason is plain: the people of the north have, and will forever have, a spirit of liberty and independence, which the people of the south have not; and therefore a religion that has no visible head is more agreeable to the independence of the climate than that which has one. (2:718)

After the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, Montesquieu’s suggestion that “the people of the north embraced the Protestant [religion]” and that Catholicism constituted the renunciation of “the spirit of liberty and independence” obviously had clear political significance. In 1598, King Henry IV had promulgated a decree at Nantes to restore internal peace in France after the wars of religion. The edict defined the rights of the French Protestants and granted them liberty of worship, full civil rights, and even subsidies for Protestant schools and city governments. Cardinal Richelieu during the reign of Louis XIII, and then Cardinal Mazarin under Louis XIV, had slowly stripped the French Protestants of all political rights, until the final revocation of the edict in 1665. For Montesquieu, Richelieu’s and Mazarin’s catholicization of France equaled a southernization of the country—a progressive loss of liberty and a move toward a southern religion “away from morality itself”: “In Rome there is nothing as convenient as a church to pray to God and to assassinate your neighbor. People are not restrained here as in other countries, and, if you don’t like the looks of another man, you only need to order your valet to stab him two or three times, and then take refuge in a church” (1:677). France, for Montesquieu, was a northern country—and thus it opened to Protestantism and religious freedoms. The imaginary dividing line between north and south could be singled out for him, with great geographic precision, in the Apennine Mountains:
There is, in Italy, a southern wind, called Sirocco, which passes through the sands of Africa before reaching Italy. It rules that country; it exerts its power over all spirits; it produces a universal weightiness and slowness; Sirocco is the intelligence that presides over all Italian heads, and I am tempted to believe that the difference one notices between the inhabitants of northern Lombardy, and those of the rest of Italy, derives from the fact that Lombardy is protected by the Apennines, which defend her from the havoc of the Sirocco. (2:45)

Europe, to be sure, is one, like the sheep’s tongue: but heat and cold have different effects on this one tongue. “I froze the half of this tongue,” and, as the drive to pleasure cooled down, “a spirit of independence and liberty” condensed; the other half, under relentless heat and African winds, compelled only by pleasure, made the very idea of freedom evaporate. This was, in the last analysis, the lesson to be learned from the fall of Rome. Sure, the causes of Rome’s fall lay in its warlike and colonial nature. Yet Roman decadence had arrived, first and foremost, with a general covetousness for pleasure: “Their desires became immense” (2:353). All sorts of “Oriental” excesses, indolence, and lust (2:122), drowned Rome in the path to decadence. In the “Reflections on the Inhabitants of Rome,” at the conclusion of the Voyages, Montesquieu recalled those excesses, and, above all, decadent Rome’s “prodigious appetite,” the “debauchery of the table,” the “art of eating in excess” that involved the “use of emetics to eat more” (1:910–11). Now we know the reason of it all: the Romans’ papillae, like the sheep’s, had enlarged in an excessive search for taste. From a sheep’s tongue, an entire theoretical system was thus born: it encompassed all and explained the universe. It theorized, at least, Europe as the climate antithetical to all such debauchery. The antithesis to such Europe, however, was no longer east, but was to be found in the history of Europe itself—in its past, that is, which was its south. In the beginning, there was the tongue.

The Geography of History

Since the human mind has the experience of time but does not have a representation for it, it represents time through spatial images.
—GIORGIO AGAMBEN, Infanzia e storia
Climate, Robert Shackleton insists, was not the only cause *De l'esprit des lois* had singled out for the formation of the general spirit of a nation. Montesquieu would have certainly agreed, but with an important qualification: “Mankind is influenced by various causes: by the climate, by religion, by the laws, by the maxims of government, by precedents, morals, and customs; whence is formed a general spirit of nations. In each country, as any one of these causes acts with more force, the others weaken in proportion. Nature and climate rule almost alone over the savages” (*Oeuvres* 2:558). Certainly, a whole series of cultural factors—religions, laws, governments, precedents, morals, and customs—balanced for Montesquieu the effects of nature, and hence of climate, in human societies. Savagery, however, as the borderline circumstance of a complete subjection to a state of nature, prevented culture from modifying or taming the effects of nature. These, as we already know, were felt mainly through pores and papillae contracting and dilating under the action of temperature.

Perfect sociability, on the one hand, and a state of nature, on the other, were the two extremes of the human condition—extremes that represented, in fact, the dual or dialectical nature of humankind discussed above: “Man, as a physical being, is governed like all the other bodies by invariable laws. As an intelligent being, he tirelessly transgresses the laws that God has established, and changes the ones he himself has established” (Montesquieu, *Oeuvres* 2:234). Like man (the particular), like nations (the general law): “The life of nations is like the life of men” (2:377). In an absolute state of nature, the law of climate was absolute. In an absolute state of civilization, the law of nature was nothing, and the law of man, politics, was all.

In this sense, neither the state of nature, nor perfect sociability, were possible conditions for humankind: being “man,” for Montesquieu, meant to partake of a dual nature. The hypothesis of a state of nature—that is, of “man before the establishment of society” (2:235)—was, then, just a hypothesis, useful only insofar as it helped theorize the differences in social realities as tensions toward one of the two hypothetical extremes. For Montesquieu, there were, in other words, societies that tended toward the “state of nature, and in which [men are] unrestrained either by a political or civil law” (2:913); and there were societies that tended toward perfect sociability: they could be republics (“moins il y a de luxe dans une république, plus elle est parfaite”; 2:334); aristocracies
For Montesquieu, who concurred with Hobbes on at least this point (Lowenthal 494), the state of nature was the hypothetical beginning of human history; the end of that history was to be the utopic realization of politics as the final transgression of the natural laws that God has established. It was not Hobbes’s fantasy of a state of nature, but the reality of the different kinds of societies that stood between beginning and end, that interested Montesquieu: his question, if any was central to De l’esprit des lois, was how to escape an undesirable proximity to the state of nature and establish, as close as humanly possible, the reign of the law. The perfecting of the law was the slow progress of politics, “a smooth file, which cuts gradually, and attains its end by a slow progression” (Oeuvres 2:487). If the utopic end of politics was the fulfillment of perfection, its most attainable and practical one was the understanding and preservation of the circumstances that had allowed “our admirable law of today” (2:317) to flourish from previous conditions of savagery and barbarity.

A progress from savagery to the law, however, was not for Montesquieu a merely historical telos. A distrust for history was certainly in the air of Montesquieu’s France: “The reformation of knowledge which Descartes [had] envisaged, and actually did bring about, was designed to contribute nothing to historical thought, because he did not believe history to be, strictly speaking, a branch of knowledge at all” (Collingwood 59). Especially the kind of universal histories à la Bossuet, informed by an ecumenical ethos too much in odor of biblical orthodoxy, were consistently perceived as “incompatible with the new spirit of scientific enquiry stirring in the late seventeenth century” (Barraclough 84). Despite such epochal skepticism, Montesquieu had expressed in his Pensées the “intention to write a historical work” (Shackleton, Montesquieu 227). That he eventually discarded such a project to write instead De l’esprit des lois does not mean that Montesquieu had abandoned his historicist ambitions altogether (see Hulliung 3–5, 140–72): on the contrary, already in the preface we are informed that De l’esprit des lois intends to trace, from a set of “principles,” nothing less than “the histories of all nations” (Montesquieu, Oeuvres 2:229); and by book 3, we are reminded that Montesquieu’s was not a refutation of previous histories,
but, rather, its ultimate synthesis and “confirmation of the entire body of historiography” (2:251).

*De l’esprit des lois* presented, then, not a local history of France or Europe, but a universal history with Europe and France as the last stage—modernity—of a linear chronology of infinite betterment. This was universal history as philosophy of history: written from France, it recapitulated and comprehended in a retrospective gaze the entire body of historiography and transcended the various “chronicle[s] of miscellaneous facts” into a unitary perspective giving meaning to and “affirming the superiority of the present age” (Carrithers, “Philosophy of History” 61). Undoubtedly, Montesquieu’s philosophy of history was not Bossuet’s universal history. It was not guided, for example, by the assumption of a theological design. A *teleological* design, however, was certainly present in Montesquieu; only, it had to be derived not deductively from a putative will of God, but inductively, from the empirical order of physical realities (on Montesquieu’s historical empiricism, see Oake 48–49). This was Montesquieu’s “dialectics of history” (Althusser 37–58): it began from empirical observations and finished by arranging them into a telos pointing to “the manifestation of an intemporal truth” (Gearhart 180).

And while the creation of the Lord Almighty no longer appeared perfect in all its parts, humankind’s secularized progress from imperfect savagery, through barbarism, to “the laws of today” was then imagined as an empirically observable telos. Progress was observable in the sense that it was not simply something that could be grasped by history—the science of a past that no one can see any longer—but the subject matter of geography. Progress, in other words, was understood by Montesquieu as a series of contiguous, observable places. “Savage” could no longer be for Montesquieu the myth of a prehistoric past impossible for the scientist to observe, but an ethnographic space open still to the gaze of the analyst: “savage” was the “new world” of Louisiana (Montesquieu, *Oeuvres* 2:292) and of America in general (2:536), which had not yet entered the West; savage was Siberia (2:537), as was part of North Africa (2:602). In these *places* resided the observable origin of historical progress that the reportages of merchants, travelers, local historians, and missionaries had but begun, ethnographically, to reconstruct.

Geography was, then, becoming the new organizing principle of Montesquieu’s theory of progress. History was, like a branch of the *ars memorandi*, a progress best represented as a movement from one place to
another. Barbarity was its second stage, observable in the farming tribes of North Africa (2:602), in the despotic regimes of the Near East (2:537), in the customs of India (2:478), and, “no matter what others say,” in those of China (1:1358). Barbarous was a place of history, where nomadic hunting had been successfully replaced by a farming culture rooted in the communal territory (2:537). Barbarous, more important, was a place where “histories always feel servitude” (2:537).

History was thus spatialized, and time converted into place: Asia, Africa, and America represented old, prehistoric moments in the geography of universal history. They “were assigned a place ‘elsewhere’” of the present, marginalized as the not-yet of the European “structure of time” (Chakrabarty 8). It was in Europe, and in Europe only, that the historical passage from barbarity to “the laws of today” could finally be observed.

Europe, indeed, was the present—or, in fact, it was the synthesis of human history, the place of the final fulfillment of modernity overcoming a past of barbarity. In the Pensées that Montesquieu was collecting for his eventually aborted attempt at writing a universal history, we read that Greece had opened nothing less than a “new time”: “In those new times, the fervor for liberty gave them [Greeks] love for the country, heroic courage, and hatred of kings—and this drove them to do great things” (Oeuvres 1:1364). Love of freedom was the “proof of the novelty of the Greeks” in the telos of universal history. If savagery and barbarism were, then, prehistorical stages, true history seemed to open, for Montesquieu, with the “new times” of freedom. This new history was the story of freedom’s unfolding: “History is thus converted into a tale about the furtherance of virtue” or a “moral success story” (Wolf 5). Moreover, this was a story that coincided with a place—Europe, whose “circumstances,” comments a reader of Montesquieu, “are always contained within the story of liberty” (Courtois 321).

Rome—after Greece, and for only a short while—represented the second stage of the European progress to freedom, at least “until this democracy [Rome] became corrupted” (Montesquieu, Oeuvres 1:1369). With the fall of Rome, it was then “our German fathers” (2:329)—“The people of the North of Europe, source of freedom” (1:1354)—who came to answer the historical task of realizing liberty in Europe once and for all.

German, like its counterpart Roman, was a term loaded with politi-
cal overtones in Montesquieu’s France: Romanists imagined the French monarchy as the ideal heir of the absolute powers of the Roman emperor; Germanists, instead, argued for a Germanic origin of France, in which the monarch’s powers were subject to a check by the intermediate feudal nobility—intermediate because this nobility would mediate politically between the interests of the monarch and those of amorphous servant masses with no rights which the eighteenth century called, with no hint of Romantic and nationalist connotations, “the people” (“people as a social, rather than a national entity,” writes Hof 74). Hardly any argument about Rome and Germania, in fact, was free from political overtones in this context. Attempts to sever France from southern and specifically Roman origins had noticeably begun at the time of the Gallican schism of the fifteenth century, and a politico-religious question had soon turned into a wider cultural one concerning the relation of France with Rome. Put simply: was France the heir of Rome, or was its ancestry to be located somewhere else, as in the German forests? For François Hotman, author of *Franco-Gallia* (1573), the German conquest of French Gaul had brought to the country a love for freedom and equality (brotherhood had to wait for two more centuries!) and had dispelled the despotism with which Hotman identified the Romans. Politically, this meant—for Hotman before Montesquieu—that “the monarch’s absolute power in France was therefore an usurpation of that primitive [German] freedom, and needed some correction” (Carravetta 46).

Translating such question in philological terms, Guillame de Postel’s *De originibus* of 1538 (echoed in 1580 by Joachim Périon’s *Linguae gallicae origine*) had steadfastly refuted, for instance, a Latin origin of the French language. Still in the *Encyclopédie*, and until the emergence of German Romantic philology, an independence of the French language from Latin was in fact de rigueur in antiabsolutist circles—and an argument to the contrary was a clear avocation of monarchic unlimited power.

Following Martin Thom, I should observe that this dispute had very important bearing on theories and historical chronologies of Europe. The question was whether modern Europe had originated in the Mediterranean, during classical times; or whether it had begun in the Middle Ages, with the Northern Franks’ destruction of the Roman Empire. Romanists were ready to “condemn rather than celebrate the medieval order” (Thom 26), whereas the Germanists, anticipating a Romantic cult of the Middle Ages that I will discuss in chapter 4, made modern Europe originate from a northern overcoming of ancient and Mediterrane-
nean Europe. In other words, the antithesis was not simply a political one pitting against each other the Romanist defenders of absolute monarchy and the Germanist proponents of an aristocratic middle class between monarch and third estate. The antithesis was also, in the full sense of the word, geopolitical: whereas Germanism “celebrated the contribution of the Aryan nomadic tribes to European culture,” Romanism, instead, “argued that it was the urban traditions of Egypt, Phoenicia and Asia Minor that had created a basis for civilization in the Mediterranean” that had peaked with Rome (Thom 27).

Far from “de-mythologizing” (as claimed by Hulliung 60) the myth of either a Roman or a German origin of Europe (ergo France), Montesquieu was ready to take from the diatribes of Romanists and Germanists a twofold conclusion: Roman laws (in political terms, monarchical absolutism) belonged to an ancient cycle of history that had by now ended with the fall of Rome; German laws (i.e., monarchical power mediated by the nobility) had opened yet a new historical cycle—modernity—that had now climaxed in France. The admonition addressed to the French monarchy was clear: in Louis Althusser’s words, absolute power was an “ancient” form of government, and a reintroduction of absolutism in France “today” would have meant a regress into history’s past; “modern times belong to feudal monarchy, and feudal monarchy belongs to modern times” (64–65).

I will get in a moment to Montesquieu’s understanding of feudal monarchy as a separation of powers between king and nobility and the foundation of modern freedoms. What I should notice first is the idiosyncratic way in which Montesquieu translated the political split between Germanists and Romanists in his own geohistorical terms. Germans and Romans, in other words, became for him concepts dividing Europe into two complementary antitheses, and its history into an ancient and a modern time. Book 4 had already established, in some Manichaean way, the “Differences of the Effects of Education in the Ancients and the Moderns,” as the title goes. Also a part of book 21 had been devoted to “the principal difference between the commerce of the ancients and the moderns.” In truth, De l’esprit des lois in its entirety was committed to contrasting the “tyrannical and arbitrary principles” that were “guided by ancient histories” to “our modern reason” (2:379). Germany and Rome were now the places and times of all these differences.

Rome, southern and Mediterranean Rome, stood as the synecdoche of an ancient past that no longer was. It was not only Rome as a historical
empire that was ancient, premodern, and precommercial: “their [the Romans’] genius, their glory, their military education, and the form of their government kept them from commerce” (2:632). But also contemporary Rome, the one Montesquieu had seen in the present of 1729, was a premodern, precommercial space where “every one is at his ease except those who labor, those who cultivate the arts, those who are industrious, those who have land, those who are engaged in trade” (2:713). Not Rome as a historical empire but Rome as a place emerges as “ancient.” What is Rome, then? Rome, simply, is the past—the time of Europe’s yore that archeology and tourism are already reclaiming for the northern gaze: “We can never leave the Romans; so it is that still today, in their capital, we overlook the new palaces and go look for the ruins of the past” (2:414).

Against this backward and southern place, “our German fathers” open instead the way to modernity. “In northern regions a machine robust and well built but heavy finds pleasure in whatever is apt to throw the spirits into motion” (2:477). What this meant was that, if “mankind are influenced by various causes,” and if “in each country, as any one of these causes acts with more force, the others weaken in proportion,” one could then conclude that climate was the strongest cause in the south (Rome), history in the north (Germania). The historical progress from ancientness to modernity remained the prerogative of a northern spirit “in motion”: “According to Montesquieu, climate in the north and in the temperate zones is such that in the end it has little visible effect on political institutions. It is in the zones close to the equator, according to Montesquieu, that climate has a determining role in a direct sense . . . it is in the ‘south’ where the particular circumstances of climate have a directly determining effect” (Gearhart 187).

Only Europe, compared to the savagery and barbarity of other continents, has a history. In a way, history is Europe, whereas other continents are only fragments of its past stages. Yet history is also a progress that goes from an ancient south—“a bad country” (un mauvais pays) governed by climate—to the modern north—“a better one” (un [pays] meilleur) (Montesquieu, Oeuvres 2:532–33). It was in this better north that one had to look, then, to discover the traces of Europe’s modernity: its constitutional freedoms; its forms of government (2:409); and, above all, its most modern institution of all—private property.
Gallic Feudalism

These Romans are fools!
—RENÉ GOSCINNY AND ALBERT UDERZO, Asterix le Gaulois

What François Bernier had gained after his thirteen years of travels in the Mogul Empire (first published in 1663 as Mémoires sur quelques affaires de l’Empire Mogol) was the undisturbed certainty—reinforced rather than weakened by the very fact “that he failed to grasp the basic tenets of Brahananism” (Mukherjee 11)—that freedom was a uniquely European good, and that such uniqueness had something to do with another uniquely European good—private property. The Other of Europe—Oriental India in this case—was despotic not so much because of Aristotle’s climatic conditions, but simply because lacking of a concept of private property: “The King is proprietor of all the lands in the empire, there can exist neither dukedoms nor marquisates, nor can any family be found possessed of wealth arising from a domain and living upon its own patrimony” (Bernier 227). Differently than Francis Bacon, who believed that knowledge is power, Bernier rather believed that property is power, and that on its fair division resides a fair division of political authority. What had made Europe free, for Bernier, was the rise of a propertied class: ownership had entailed all subsequent divisions of power, and led, as a necessary consequence, to constitutionalism, freedom, justice, and wealth. As Bernier concluded his address to Colbert, the minister of finances for Louis xiv, he wrote: “Yes, my dear Lord, to conclude briefly I must repeat it; take away the right of private property in land and you introduce as a sure and necessary consequence tyranny, slavery, injustice, beggary and barbarism” (Bernier 238).

With the Travels in the Mogul Empire Bernier had thus introduced a new commonplace, complementary to the climatological one, in the rhetorical distinctions of free Europe from the despotoc Orient. Henri de Boullainvilliers, in the Histoire de l’ancien gouvernement de France (1727), had brought the question of the relationship between property and freedom to the fore when he had maintained that despotism resulted from “the barbaric law of the Orient [which] annihilated private property” (qtd. in Venturi, “Oriental Despotism” 139). Montesquieu had little patience for Boullainvilliers (Montesquieu, Oeuvres 2:891); but the idea of private property as the foundation for European freedoms certainly
proved an attractive one, at least to the extent that private property meant for him an overcoming of the state of nature and a historical progress toward civil liberty: “As men renounced their natural independence to live under political laws, they also renounced the natural community of goods to live under civil laws. Those first laws established freedom; the second, property” (2:767).

Freedom and private property were, then, the two sides of the same coin—of the difference, that is, between Europe and the rest of the world. The problem, for Montesquieu, was that both Bernier and Boulainvilliers had seen private property as something short of miraculous, which “suddenly appeared over all Europe without being connected with any of the former institutions” (2:883). Once again, Montesquieu’s scientific ambitions could not allow for miracles to go unexplained: “I should think my work imperfect if I did not speak about these laws” that established freedom and private property at the same time (2:883). Book 30 of *De l’esprit des lois*, announced as a “Theory of Feudal Laws,” served as Montesquieu’s explanation of Europe’s miracle. Feudalism was, with an allusion to Virgil’s *Georgics*, the metaphoric “root” from which Europe had grown tall: “The feudal laws form a very beautiful prospect. A venerable old oak raises its lofty head to the skies, the eye sees from afar its spreading leaves; upon drawing nearer, it perceives the trunk but does not discern the root; one must look under the ground to discover it” (Montesquieu 2:883–84).

Digging around the tree of European freedoms, Montesquieu found the roots of feudalism. That such roots were firmly implanted in northern soil should not, at this point, come as a surprise. Briefly, this was the argument of book 30: the “dark labyrinth” of the history of feudalism brings us back to the German laws (2:884). When the German princes were fighting the Romans, they instituted laws, which rewarded the most valorous soldiers by elevating them to the rank of “companions,” and by compensating them with the fruits of the booty. These nomadic princes had no lands to give away; the companions were, then, not proper feudatories, but early antecedents of them (2:885–86). Companions were subsequently transformed into so-called *antrustiones* when the German tribes of the Franks founded a monarchy in what had been Roman Gaul; the princes now had lands to give away as revocable rewards. The “unique property” of the prince was, for the first time in human history, divided (2:887). Vassalage grew from the institution of the *antrustiones* when growingly powerful landlords started opposing the king during
the Merovingian and Carolingian periods: they obtained that land property be made hereditary and irrevocable for their descendants; and they started attracting to their sphere of authority all the freemen that had been, until then, under the tutelage of the monarch. As fiefs became patrimonial, the vassals grew into an aristocracy by birth: its titles and power were now perpetual and no longer depending on the discretion of the king (2:890–92). Finally, the authority of the king was counterbalanced by the growing authority of the aristocracy: privatization of property had then created the presuppositions for a political division of power, and for the political liberties of the Franks (2:892). This first division of power, in turn, engenders other ones, and becomes the founding stone of European freedom: “There is no freedom if judicial power is not separated from legislative and executive powers” (2:397).

Feudalism thus confirmed Bernier’s theory: private property was the cause for the growing influence of the European aristocracy, which served to balance the otherwise absolute power of the king-despot found in the east. Such confirmation, however, also produced two corollaries: that the barbarous and prehistoric east dispensed altogether with any concept of private property (in chapter 5 of this book I will discuss some dissenting opinions); and that ancient Roman property was not real or modern property. In the early Roman republic, Montesquieu explained, possessions were not patrimonial but personal. Instead of being inherited from father to son, property was “disposed through a popular assembly” (2:780). In the times of Justinian, on the other hand, private property was patrimonial, but fragmented, at the death of the owner, between all sons and daughters. The effect of these laws of transmission was to render impossible any accumulation of power alternative to the emperor’s (2:789): without patrilineal inheritance of private property, the republic was doomed to end with the dissolution of Caesarism. It was only with the Franks that the supposedly ancient history of property took a new and modern turn toward the feudal establishment of patrimonial assets, and the consequent creation of an alternative source of power concentrated in the nobility. Modern Europe, as the overcoming of barbarity and the foundation of a new mediated sovereignty, then came into being with Charlemagne, who remains Montesquieu’s very personification of the spirit of modern Europe: “Charlemagne’s continuous victories, the sweetness and justice of his government, seemed to found a new monarchy . . . Arts and Sciences seemed to reappear. One can say that the people of France was destroying Barbarity” (1:1095).
If Europe was, since Aristotle, the land of freedom, Frankish patrimonial law was for Montesquieu the only conceivable origin of Europe. It was also the origin of a new end of history, which was neither despotism (Asia) nor colonialism (the South), but rather the progress of man to freedom and commercial wealth. In theorizing such origin, old classical distinctions acquired a new and modern flavor: the freedom that Europe could boast vis-à-vis Oriental despotism was now reframed to embody the needs of a rising capitalist Europe concerned less with climate and abstract ideals than with “the preservation of every man’s right and property” (Locke 5:62). More important, the east-west antithesis was supplemented by a new one that divided Europe into a before and an after of the institution of private property—between an ancient precapitalist south and a modern and capitalist north. The combination of climate (nature) and private property (culture), then, served Montesquieu “to establish the intrinsic superiority of Europe over the rest of the world, Asia in particular. At the same time, it provide[d] the basis for Montesquieu’s assertions of the superiority of one part of Europe over another” (Moe 26–27).

Put differently, after 1748 Europe coincided with a theory of history in which the south figured already as the negative term—nature, the past—posited by the spirit of a progressive north on the path toward its self-definition and self-realization. History, understood metaphysically as universal history, was a progress in space—from an ancient south to a modern north. At the basis of this theory was climatology, along with some bizarre experiment on a sheep’s tongue. Not much, one would think, to make the theory credible. But the ways of the rhetorical unconscious are many.

Coda

Who does not know how much the question of the influence of climate has been studied, along with the importance that Montesquieu gave to climate! If one considers the direct influence of climate on man, that influence may well be less powerful than it has been supposed. But the indirect influence of climate.

—FRANÇOIS PIERRE GUILLAUME GUIZOT,
_Histoire de la civilisation en Europe depuis la chute de l’Empire romain jusqu’à la révolution française_
In 1769, William Robertson, a firm proponent of the theory of northern feudalism as the origin of European modernity, trustingly echoed Montesquieu’s climatology of northern pride:

The same circumstances that prevented the barbarous nations from becoming populous, contributed to inspire, or to strengthen, the martial spirit by which they were distinguished. Inured by the rigour of their climate, or the poverty of their soil, to hardships which rendered their bodies firm and their minds vigorous; accustomed to a course of life which was a continual preparation for action; and disdaining every occupation but that of war or of hunting, they undertook and prosecuted their military enterprises with an ardour and impetuosity, of which men softened by the refinements of more polished times can scarcely form any idea. (5)

Around ten years later, however, Edward Gibbon had to entertain the possibility that climatology, questioned as a science, could interfere with, and weaken, his theory put forth in The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. Did this mean that, along with climatology, one had to throw away anything built with it? Certainly not! Even after the fall, he wrote, “the name of Rome must yet command our involuntary respect: the climate (whatsoever may be its influence) was no longer the same” (3:978). Whatsoever may be its influence . . . . Luckily, climatology was no longer necessary for Gibbon to claim that the Germans, not the Romans, were “the rude ancestors of the most polished nations of modern Europe” (1:1); or that “the northern countries of Europe . . . were filled with a hardy race of barbarians, who despised life when it was separated from freedom” (1:32). What had replaced climatology to give scientific authority to these claims? Empirical historiography had: rather than dissecting goats, Gibbon consulted archives, annotated pages, compared documents, evaluated circumstances—and, above all, he read so carefully “the comprehensive genius of the president de Montesquieu” (472n). Not Montesquieu the climatologist, mind you, but Montesquieu the legal historian of Gallic feudalism, the one who had claimed that constitutional freedoms were first “found in the northern woods” (Montesquieu, Oeuvres 2:407): “The Franks, after they mingled with their Gallic subjects, might have imparted the most valuable of human gifts, a spirit and system of constitutional liberty . . . which had been sketched in the woods of Germany” (Gibbon 2:489). The northern woods of Montesquieu thus returned in Gibbon’s woods of Germany.
Montesquieu, who had to find in the empirical science of climatology the legitimacy for his theory, was transformed into a legitimating authority himself. The process—from climatology to German freedoms—had been bracketed away, when not even denounced as faulty. Its end result, however, began to return as the rhetorical unconscious: it had become archival truth.

From Scottish historians to Italian physiologists, physiognomists, biologists, and anthropologists—the gap was not an unbridgeable one for the rhetorical unconscious. Montesquieu’s Europe became ethnography for Cesare Lombroso; climatology turned into fieldwork and biology: social maturity, instead, remained a progress from the prehistory of a homo meridionalis under the yoke of climate and natural factors to the full realization of the homo europaeus (see Teti 154). Perfectly sociable, perfectly cultured, “an intelligent being” ready to “transgress the laws that God has established,” the homo europaeus was the distinguished member of this new and modern Europe in formation—a refined Republic of Letters that the homo meridionalis awkwardly entered with that constant fear of being mistaken for the delivery boy of the Café Orientale downstairs.