

# Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Spring 2020

Volume 46 Issue 2

- 163 Michael Anton Montesquieu's *Considerations*: A Case Study in the Cycle of Regimes
- 187 Marco Menon Leo Strauss in Italy: The "Three Waves" of Italian Strauss Studies
- 229 James H. Nichols Jr. A Discourse on the Beginning of Tacitus's *Histories*
- 261 Thomas L. Pangle A Synoptic Introduction to the Ontological Background of Aristotle's Political Theory
- 291 Rong Hengying The Reception of Leo Strauss in China: Two Chinese Straussians, between Theological Temptation and Political Criticism
- 313 Paul Seaton **Review Essay:**  
*Naïve Readings: Revelles Political and Philosophic* by Ralph Lerner
- 331 Erik Dempsey **An Exchange on Carey:**  
Reviews of *Natural Reason and Natural Law: An Assessment of the Straussian Criticisms of Thomas Aquinas*, by James Carey
- 339 John W. Grant
- 345 Antonio Sosa
- 353 James Carey Reply to reviewers
- 371 Erik Dempsey
- 377 John Grant Reply to James Carey
- 383 Marco Andreacchio **An Exchange on Menon's Strauss:**  
Review of *Scritti su filosofia e religione*, by Leo Strauss, edited by Raimondo Cubeddu and Marco Menon
- 399 Marco Menon Reply to Marco Andreacchio
- 405 Marco Andreacchio Reply to Marco Menon
- 411 Michael R. Gonzalez **Book Reviews:**  
*Why Liberalism Failed* by Patrick J. Deneen
- 419 Till Kinzel *The Strauss-Krüger Correspondence: Returning to Plato through Kant* by Susan Meld Shell
- 427 Patrick Malcolmson *The Pursuit of Happiness and the American Regime: Political Theory in Literature* by Elizabeth Amato
- 433 Tomasz Stefanek *Kryzys nauki o polityce z perspektywy filozofii politycznych Leo Straussa i Erica Voegelina* by Marek Pająk

# Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

- Editor-in-Chief* Timothy W. Burns, Baylor University
- General Editors* Charles E. Butterworth • Timothy W. Burns
- General Editors (Late)* Howard B. White (d. 1974) • Robert Horwitz (d. 1987)  
Seth G. Benardete (d. 2001) • Leonard Grey (d. 2009) •  
Hilail Gildin (d. 2015)
- Consulting Editors* Christopher Bruell • David Lowenthal • Harvey C.  
Mansfield • Thomas L. Pangle • Ellis Sandoz • Kenneth  
W. Thompson
- Consulting Editors (Late)* Leo Strauss (d. 1973) • Arnaldo Momigliano (d. 1987) •  
Michael Oakeshott (d. 1990) • John Hallowell (d. 1992)  
• Ernest L. Fortin (d. 2002) • Muhsin Mahdi (d. 2007) •  
Joseph Cropsey (d. 2012) • Harry V. Jaffa (d. 2015)
- International Editors* Terence E. Marshall • Heinrich Meier
- Editors* Peter Ahrens Dorf • Wayne Ambler • Marco Andreacchio •  
Maurice Auerbach • Robert Bartlett • Fred Baumann • Eric  
Buzzetti • Susan Collins • Patrick Coby • Erik Dempsey •  
Elizabeth C'de Baca Eastman • Edward J. Erler • Maureen  
Feder-Marcus • Robert Goldberg • L. Joseph Hebert •  
Pamela K. Jensen • Hannes Kerber • Mark J. Lutz • Daniel  
Ian Mark • Ken Masugi • Carol L. McNamara • Will  
Morrisey • Amy Nendza • Charles T. Rubin • Leslie G.  
Rubin • Thomas Schneider • Susan Meld Shell • Geoffrey  
T. Sigalet • Nicholas Starr • Devin Stauffer • Bradford P.  
Wilson • Cameron Wybrow • Martin D. Yaffe • Catherine  
H. Zuckert • Michael P. Zuckert
- Copy Editor* Les Harris
- Designer* Sarah Teutschel
- Inquiries* ***Interpretation, A Journal of Political Philosophy***  
Department of Political Science  
Baylor University  
1 Bear Place, 97276  
Waco, TX 76798
- email* [interpretation@baylor.edu](mailto:interpretation@baylor.edu)

## Montesquieu's *Considerations*: A Case Study in the Cycle of Regimes

MICHAEL ANTON  
HILLSDALE COLLEGE  
*manton@hillsdale.edu*

### WHAT KIND OF BOOK IS THIS?

Montesquieu's *Considerations on the Causes of the Grandeur of the Romans and Their Decadence*<sup>1</sup> (hereafter *Considerations*) is difficult to categorize. The author's two other major works—*Persian Letters* and *The Spirit of the Laws*—each appear to be something familiar: an epistolary novel in the former case, political philosophy in the latter. Yet Montesquieu saw fit to include prefaces to both books clarifying his intent, a step he declined to take for the *Considerations*.

The *Considerations* is easily the least read, and written about, of Montesquieu's books—an odd fate for a short work on a topic of enduring popularity and fascination. David Lowenthal may be said to have revived the *Considerations* from oblivion, at least in the English-speaking world, with his 1965 translation—only the third in English and the first in nearly a century. His introduction is long and comprehensive, as befits an introduction to a nearly-forgotten work. Yet also befitting an introduction, Lowenthal mostly declines to tell readers what conclusions to draw, encouraging us instead to read and judge for ourselves. In a separate article published in 1970,<sup>2</sup> Lowen-

<sup>1</sup> While throughout this paper I use David Lowenthal's translation (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1965), I occasionally make changes for greater accuracy and precision. For instance, the words in Montesquieu's title that Lowenthal translates as "greatness" (*grandeur*) and "decline" (*décadence*) are not merely perfectly intelligible in English but direct cognates.

<sup>2</sup> David Lowenthal, "The Design of Montesquieu's *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of*

that unlocks the design of the *Considerations* and shows it to be far more intricate than first appears. Befitting a work of scholarship, he is here less shy about telling us what he thinks. The *Considerations*, he argues, has both a theoretical and practical purpose. The former is to elucidate the eternal principles of “historical causation,” which may be “general” or “particular” and “moral” or “physical,” and to show how these varying causes interact to produce specific effects: “the work constitutes an attempt to bring to bear on human history the kind of causal analysis Montesquieu admired so much in the natural philosophy of Descartes and Newton.”<sup>3</sup> The book’s practical aim is to encourage “republican representative government on a national (e.g., Italian, French, etc.) and nationalistic basis” rather than more expansive, imperialistic designs.

Richard Myers<sup>4</sup> draws out another practical intent for the *Considerations*: to reassert, in keeping with Christian doctrine but against then-contemporary practice, a stricter separation between religion and politics. Montesquieu does so mostly through demonstrating the baleful effects of theological disputes and ecclesiastical interference on the later Eastern, or “Greek,” Empire. Yet this illumination of the past is meant to cast judgment on, and suggest solutions for, Montesquieu’s present:

Any student of French history can, of course, see what it is that Montesquieu is worried about. At the time of the composition of the *Greatness and Decline*, religious conflict had been tearing France apart for almost two centuries. As recently as 1685, Louis XIV, under pressure from the clergy, had revoked the Edict of Nantes, effectively banning the practice of Protestantism in France and chasing many of the country’s most valuable and most productive citizens abroad; and throughout Montesquieu’s lifetime, the vicious struggle between Jansenists and Jesuits—a struggle in which the monarchy took a very active part—continued to disturb the peace of the land.<sup>5</sup>

Myers goes on to argue that Montesquieu has a “strategy...for establishing a better separation of ecclesiastical and secular power” and that chapter 22 “contains several indications as to how Montesquieu thought such an enterprise might be carried out.”

---

*the Romans and Their Decline*,” *Interpretation* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1970): 144–68.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Myers, “Christianity and Politics in Montesquieu’s *Greatness and Decline of the Romans*,” *Interpretation* 17, no. 2 (Winter 1989–90): 223–38.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

These “practical” arguments accord with the findings of Paul A. Rahe, who has conclusively demonstrated how the *Considerations* came to be.<sup>6</sup> It was drafted as the first part of a tripartite work entitled *Reflections on Universal Monarchy in Europe*, which Montesquieu completed but did not publish as originally intended. The first part he published separately, as the *Considerations*. He included the third part, on the English constitution, in *The Spirit of the Laws* (book 11, chapter 6). The central and eponymous second part he never published at all. The reason, Rahe argues, is that, taken together, the three parts made too obvious, and therefore dangerous, Montesquieu’s criticism of the unwisdom and immoderation of certain European monarchs—above all Louis XIV—who sought to extend their rule beyond their native lands in (conscious or otherwise) imitation of Roman imperialism and also inspired by Christianity’s universalist claims.

#### HISTORY? PHILOSOPHY? OR “PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY”?

But this still does not explain why Montesquieu chose to publish the *Considerations* separately. Indeed, these facts may be said to deepen the mystery: for if Montesquieu held back the original intended work to protect his safety, why did he publish any part of it at all? Perhaps we may gain perspective by stepping back and examining the *Considerations* on its own terms as a stand-alone work.

The book contemplates the entire history of a single people, from its establishment as a political community to its eventual dissolution. It is also one of the earliest works to be extensively footnoted by the author himself. The vast majority of those notes refer to ancient histories. One might be tempted to conclude therefore that the *Considerations* is a history. Yet the number of significant people and events—mythical and historical—that Montesquieu does not discuss is impressive. Aeneas appears not at all; of Romulus, Montesquieu says only that he “adopted the Sabine buckler.” Some of the most notable heroics of the early republican period—Horatius at the bridge, Camillus expelling the Gauls, Decius’s self-sacrifice—pass unremarked. Famous stories—from the single combat of the Horatii, to the execution of Manlius Capitolinus, to the disaster of the Caudine Forks—go untold. Montesquieu similarly says nothing about the birth, crucifixion, or resurrection of Christ, the early preaching of the Gospels, or the conversion of Constantine. Other notable

<sup>6</sup> Paul A. Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 19–26 and part 1; and Rahe, *Soft Despotism, Democracy’s Drift* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 5–7.

figures are mentioned but unconnected to the chief reasons for their fame. For instance, Montesquieu twice references Tiberius Gracchus, but not—as Machiavelli does—to impute to him and his brother the beginning of the end of republican rule.<sup>7</sup>

The *Considerations* would then seem not to be a history. But what *is* it? In retelling the history of Rome, Montesquieu generally—but not always—moves the chronology forward. The most striking exception occurs at the beginning of chapter 8, when he suddenly jumps backward almost five hundred years. The topic of that chapter is “the dissensions that always existed in the city”—that is to say, rather than advancing the chronological narrative, the chapter is more general or subject-matter driven. Surveying the titles and content of all twenty-three chapters, it would seem that seven (chaps. 2, 3, 6, 8, 9, 10, and 18) are explicitly nonchronological or general in nature while another two (chaps. 21 and 22) are both historical and general.<sup>8</sup> The presence of these seven (or nine) general chapters suggests that the *Considerations* is a work of political philosophy. But we must still confront the fact that roughly two-thirds of the book’s chapters are historical. Is the *Considerations* somehow both philosophy *and* history—even a “philosophy of history”?

Montesquieu’s title for this little volume is—for him—unusually long and descriptive. Its thirteen words almost tell a story: the transition from “grandeur” to “decadence” suggests a decline, a descent from good to bad or better to worse. But the most important word in that title is “causes.” Montesquieu promises not simply to tell the *story* of Rome but to explain the *causes* of its grandeur and its decadence. That is to say, he promises to explain both Rome’s *rise* and its *fall*. His book is as much an account of political health and growth as of disease and decay.

A consideration of causes is of course a quintessentially philosophic enterprise. Yet having accepted as much, we are still faced with questions. Why does Montesquieu choose to focus on only one example when many others were at his disposal? And why does he choose to present his thoughts chronologically—a structure more common to history than to philosophy—rather than thematically?

---

<sup>7</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1.4, 1.6, and esp. 1.37.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Considerations*, trans. Lowenthal, 23 note a, and Lowenthal, “Design of Montesquieu’s *Considerations*,” 144–45.

The choice of Rome perhaps does not need much explanation. The Roman Republic and later Empire were not merely the most successful political entities in Western history; their effects still shaped the contours and course of Europe in Montesquieu's time (and ours). Rome furthermore remained a subject of fascination precisely because of its long-lasting grandeur. Montesquieu himself writes, in *The Spirit of the Laws* (book 11, chapter 13), that "one can never leave the Romans."

The second question is less easily answered. Lowenthal, in his introduction to the *Considerations*, argues that

the *Considerations* is an inquiry into the greatness and decline of Rome that is cast in the form of a history, proceeding from Rome's origins to its end, and even beyond its end. But the purpose Montesquieu reveals in his title would not require such a structure. Had he wanted to, he could have presented a summary view of the causes of Rome's greatness and decline, as he actually does in many chapters. Instead, he chooses to follow the history, sketching in its most significant features or drawing attention to them by omission, and making what must have been a rather novel use of extensive footnoting, much in the manner of more recent scholarship. It would seem, then, that in order to explain the general and particular causes of Rome's historical saga, that saga had first to be ascertained in its reality and established as an accepted subject matter. Its various parts, its various aspects had first to be gathered together and freed of the heavy incrustation of prejudice built up over centuries. They had also to be seen in the light of new and shocking principles attacking both the religious and philosophic traditions. The notes are therefore important not only for supplying the demonstrative evidence required in historical studies but for calling men back to the original sources and alerting them to those novelties of interpretation Montesquieu could not express unguardedly.<sup>9</sup>

Without disputing the above contention—which I very much agree with—I believe it does not entirely capture all the reasons why Montesquieu framed his little book as he did. I contend that another—and perhaps the most important—reason that Montesquieu chose the chronological mode is that, by treating his subject not merely *in toto* but in order, he brings to the reader's mind the idea of the life cycle: birth, youth, growth, maturity, decline, and death. This in turn points back to an old idea of political philosophy: the cycle of regimes. It cannot be lost on certain readers that the Rome of the

---

<sup>9</sup> *Considerations*, 17.

*Considerations* undergoes the entire cycle. I believe this, fundamentally, is what the *Considerations* is: a case study in the cycle of regimes.

#### THE CYCLE AND ROME

The idea of the cycle is as old as political philosophy and appears most notably in Plato's *Republic*, book 8, and Aristotle's *Politics*, principally in books 5 and 6 which discuss the causes of regime failure. Yet the most concise statement of the cycle of which I am aware appears in Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories*, at the beginning of book 5:

Usually provinces go most of the time, in the changes they make, from order to disorder and then pass again from disorder to order, for worldly things are not allowed by nature to stand still. As soon as they reach their ultimate perfection, having no further to rise, they must descend; and similarly, once they have descended and through their disorders arrived at the ultimate depth, since they cannot descend further, of necessity they must rise. Thus they are always descending from good to bad and rising from bad to good. For virtue gives birth to quiet, quiet to leisure, leisure to disorder, disorder to ruin; and similarly, from ruin, order is born; from order, virtue; and from virtue, glory and good fortune.<sup>10</sup>

The idea, in a nutshell, is that success breeds failure, and vice versa. Success and its fruits make men overconfident, decadent, and lazy. By contrast, failure—or, more to the point, necessity—forces men to exert, or re-exert, themselves in order to survive and this exertion over time leads to successes that transcend mere survival.

One of the longest, most detailed, and arguably most famous accounts of the cycle appears in book 6 (chaps. 4–10) of Polybius.<sup>11</sup> In Polybius's telling, political communities originate as monarchies, when people grant authority to a superior man to protect them from natural and man-made dangers. But monarchy sooner or later degenerates into tyranny, as the monarch or his successors become arrogant, avaricious, and cruel. Their abuses inevitably provoke a reaction from spirited men, who overthrow the tyranny in favor of an aristocracy. But aristocracies—defined as rule by the genuinely

<sup>10</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, trans. Laura F. Banfield and Harvey C. Mansfield Jr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 185.

<sup>11</sup> Machiavelli transposes this passage, without attribution, almost word-for-word (but with significant unacknowledged changes) in *Discourses* 1.2. He there seems to wish to use Polybius as a representative of classical political philosophy simply. See Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958), 311n14.

superior, not merely the rich few—are hard to maintain. Hereditary superiority or “caste-hood” eventually breeds the same arrogance, avarice, and lack of attention to duties that gave rise to tyranny, and every aristocracy degenerates into oligarchy. Oligarchies are then felled by a similar overweening insolence that offends the common people, who rise up and institute democracy. But the common people desire above all freedom—especially freedom to indulge their appetites—and are ill-equipped to govern either the state or themselves. Popular rule inevitably descends into license and chaos, requiring a strong man once again to set things on a more stable footing. The cycle then restarts at the beginning.

It is striking how much the history of Rome follows Polybius's account nearly to the letter—especially considering that Polybius was writing in the mid-second century BC, when the Roman story still had centuries to run! Romulus founds the state and several of his successors strengthen it in various ways. But eventually the Tarquins become so insolent and oppressive that the rape of Lucretia acts as a spark that burns down the monarchy, provoking Brutus and Publicola (among others) to expel the kings and initiate the republic. The aristocracy at first operates more or less as Polybius describes, marshaling its superior talents for the common good. But popular discontent soon emerges—and intensifies as Roman elites become ever richer and less virtuous—and forces the Roman state to popularize or democratize. Unlike in the Polybian account, there are no precise moments when Rome transitions from aristocracy to oligarchy to democracy. Yet we may say that the process is ongoing throughout the entire middle and late republican periods, with a few milestones—such as the creation of the tribunes, the passage of the *lex Hortensia*,<sup>12</sup> and the rise and fall of the Gracchi—illustrating the broader trend. Eventually, democratic reform gives way to license and the state comes under the rule of one man.

Montesquieu nowhere explicitly discusses the cycle of regimes, or even once uses the word “cycle.”<sup>13</sup> Yet an early passage in chapter 1 demonstrates his awareness of the theory and is indicative of his intention for his book:

---

<sup>12</sup> This law, adopted in 287 BC, established formal political equality in Rome between patricians and plebeians by binding on all citizens resolutions passed in the *plebiscita*, or plebeian council, without requiring senate ratification. The law is said to have ended the long struggle known as the Conflict of the Orders.

<sup>13</sup> Though he cites Polybius by name twenty times (and book 6 five times), even referring once to Polybius's “usual good sense” (chap. 5). Contrast that praise with Montesquieu's dismissive criticism of Livy at the beginning of the same chapter.

When [a people] receives an affront, it is aware of nothing but its misfortune, and begins thinking of all the possible evils to which it may be subjected.

It is true, however, that the death of Lucretia was only the occasion of the revolution which occurred. For a proud, enterprising and bold people, confined within walls, must necessarily either shake off its yoke or become gentler in its ways.

One of two things had to happen: either Rome would change its government, or it would remain a small and poor monarchy.

Modern history furnishes us with an example of what happened at that time in Rome, and this is well worth noting. For the occasions which produce great changes are different, but, since men have had the same passions at all times, the causes are always the same.

Just as Henry VII, king of England, increased the power of the commons in order to degrade the lords, so Servius Tullius, before him, had extended the privileges of the people in order to reduce the senate. But the people, at once becoming bolder, overthrew the one and the other monarchy.

To draw attention only to those features in this remarkable passage most relevant to the present discussion, note, first, the implicit acceptance of one point of cycle theory: the causes of revolutions are “affronts.” Montesquieu here focuses on only one kind of reaction—popular—but the principle applies just as much to a more aristocratic or “thymotic” reaction. People—whether the few or the many—when pushed too far will push back. Second, “men have had the same passions at all times,” hence “the causes” of “great changes” are “always the same.” The ultimate reason to study history is to understand causes, which recur. This is not to say that Montesquieu anticipates Santayana’s aphorism “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Cycle theory after all holds that we are almost certainly condemned to repeat the past whether we remember it or not, because the “causes” of change are permanent and do not themselves change.

#### NOBLE CAUSES OF ROME’S GRANDEUR

What are those causes? In his first use of the word “cause” since the book’s title, Montesquieu writes in chapter 1 that “the triumphs...were the main cause of the grandeur this city attained”—not merely *a* cause but the *main* cause. The triumphs—parades in which the spoils of defeated enemies were carried through the streets of the city behind a victorious captain—were the highest honor that Rome could bestow. They incentivized Roman men to

achieve great feats—feats which could not but redound to the power, wealth, and glory of the city. Also, beginning in the republican period, when the tenure of public office was made very short (typically one year), leaders “sought to signalize their magistracy so that they might obtain new ones,” therefore “ambition did not lose even a moment.” Montesquieu contrasts this restless republican ambition with the temper of princes, who tend to run hot and cold, alternating between ambition and indolence. But the key point here is that the “main cause” of Rome’s grandeur was human ambition—in particular, human ambition channeled into and through institutions designed to inspire, rally, and utilize that ambition for the grandeur of the state.

Later in this chapter, Montesquieu—almost in passing, and yet twice, as if for emphasis—calls war the “principle” of the Roman government. This usage of “principle” here appears to be inconsistent with Montesquieu’s famous discussion of the “principles” (as distinct from the “natures”) of the types of regimes that he analyzes in book 3 of *The Spirit of the Laws*. Following that analysis, the early Roman Republic would appear to have been either a democracy or an aristocracy, or perhaps a mixture of the two. By this reckoning, Rome’s “principle” would have been “virtue,” whether understood to reside in the entire citizen-body (democracy) or only (or mostly) in the ruling class (aristocracy).

In book 11, chapter 5 of that same work, Montesquieu further distinguishes the “purpose” of states. In one sense, every state’s purpose is the same: to “maintain” itself. But each also has another purpose peculiar to itself. In Rome’s case, this secondary purpose was “expansion.” This “purpose” would thus seem to be more akin to what Montesquieu refers to as Rome’s “principle” in the *Considerations*. This suggests that war and expansion are to Montesquieu’s Rome what virtue is to the typical republic, or that—for the Romans—virtue and war were indistinguishable.

The first three uses of “virtue” in the *Considerations*—all in chapter 1—would seem to confirm the latter interpretation. Montesquieu first links “virtue” with the Romans’ “profound knowledge of military art” and their practice of always remaining at war rather than risking that “virtue” might be forgotten in peace. Second, he specifically singles out as “virtues” the Romans’ “most frightful acts of vengeance, constancy and valor.” Third, he describes Rome’s “virtues” as having been “fatal to the world,” a notion that comports especially well with his claim in *The Spirit of the Laws* that Rome’s purpose was “expansion.” In Montesquieu’s telling, perhaps uniquely in history, the principle and purpose of the Roman regime were one and the same.

Perhaps the very uniqueness of this confluence explains the uniqueness of Roman success.

Most analysts of Roman grandeur focus on Rome's republican era. While Montesquieu hardly shirks this period, he also—somewhat unusually—spends considerable space on the Roman monarchy and finds therein many causes of Rome's grandeur. He says in chapter 1 that Rome's "kings" were "all great men." This would seem to dispute the traditional understanding that Rome's last king at least, and possibly its last three, were tyrants. Or is Montesquieu quietly disputing the notion that tyrants cannot be great? He specifically praises said last king, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, both for his personal qualities and services to the state. Perhaps he means to indicate that there is an inextinguishable element of tyranny in greatness, at least in certain circumstances. Rome's kings were able to work their wills with, let us say, fewer and lesser constraints compared to those faced by the leaders of the republic. Montesquieu indicates that this initial freedom of action was indispensable to Rome's future greatness.

He also seems to be attributing, at least in part, Rome's grandeur to chance or Fortuna or Providence—at any rate, to a force beyond human control. For it would be unreasonable to assume that a succession of seven great kings in a row arose solely from human effort or design. Moreover, these two causes—tyranny and chance—are connected. Montesquieu says of Rome's kings that "at the birth of societies, the leaders of republics create the institutions; thereafter, it is the institutions that form the leaders of republics." The apparent mistake of using the word "republics" when discussing the Roman monarchy clarifies by confusing. Montesquieu appears to be restating, in gentler form, Machiavelli's dictum that "it is necessary to be alone if one wishes to order a republic anew or to reform it altogether outside its ancient orders."<sup>14</sup> Great men create the institutions which later create more great men. *Who* those early leaders *are*—and from what motives and with what design they create those institutions—matter a great deal. Human choice (beyond the choices of those few choosers, that is) does not seem to have a whole lot to say about the matter. Rome was fortunate in that its kings created institutions conducive to later liberty. Other kings—perhaps every bit as great, and likely every bit or more as tyrannical—might well have created far different institutions with far different long-term effects.

---

<sup>14</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.9.

We have noted how seldom Montesquieu mentions the heroes of the Roman Republic. Indeed, he hardly uses the proper names of persons at all between chapters 1 and 12; when he does, he is far more likely to name enemies of Rome than Romans; and when he mentions Romans it is rarely anyone famous and never to discuss any famous deeds. In healthy republics, apparently, institutions matter more than individuals. To emphasize the point, Montesquieu stops the chronological narrative almost immediately to give over the entire second chapter to a discussion of Rome's art of war. "Regarding [war] as the only art, the Romans put their whole spirit and all their thoughts into perfecting it." This devotion included vigorous and continuous physical exercise that made Roman soldiers—especially compared to the poor specimens of Montesquieu's time—almost superhuman.

Roman armies also managed to balance the demands of tradition, loyalty, and constancy with a healthy respect for innovation. No armies of the ancient world were more disciplined—desertions were all but unheard of, Montesquieu remarks—yet none were also more ready and willing to adopt the tactics and weapons of foreigners when these proved superior to their own.

In chapter 3, we learn that the success of Roman armies was in part a result of the equitable distribution of wealth at home: the early Romans "made an equal partition of the lands. This alone produced a powerful people, that is, a well-regulated society. It also produced a good army, everyone having an equal, and very great, interest in defending his country." What comes through in these passages (and others) is an early Roman emphasis on elevating the common good or enterprise and sublimating the interests of the individual, or at least yoking those interests tightly to the success of the state. This near-complete dedication to the common good combined with the underlying health of Roman institutions and the strength of the Roman soldier enabled Rome to defeat all its enemies and to recover quickly from any setback.

In chapter 4, Montesquieu indicates that another cause of Roman grandeur was the society's agrarian character and indifference or hostility to commerce: "Having become rich sooner than Rome, Carthage had also been corrupted sooner." This is precisely the sort of observation one who believes in the cycle of regimes would expect—success breeds complacency, arrogance, and indolence—but Montesquieu is here more specific in attributing corruption to riches. "The Romans were ambitious from pride, the Carthaginians from avarice; the Romans wanted to command, the Carthaginians to acquire." Commerce "polishes and softens barbarous mores," Montesquieu

elsewhere writes (*Spirit of the Laws*, book 20, chapter 1). Republican Rome's manners were, for a very long time, anything but soft or polished.

He continues that "there is nothing so powerful as a republic in which the laws are observed not through fear, nor through reason, but through passion." This passion, Montesquieu indicates, explains the Romans' remarkable constancy in the midst of disaster. Their confidence in their ways, in their laws and in themselves never wavered. "Rome was saved," he says of the aftermath of Cannae, the worst Roman defeat in history (at least until the Teutoberg Forest more than two centuries later), "by the strength of its institutions"—in particular by the constancy of the senate, which "never departed from its old maxims."

#### IGNOBLE CAUSES OF ROME'S GRANDEUR?

Thus far in the *Considerations*, seemingly every cause of Rome's grandeur might be described as "positive," owing to that initial or early devotion to virtue and exertion that cycle theory predicts will lead to success. But Montesquieu also discusses other causes, not so "positive." Chapter 6 in particular is devoted to Roman diplomacy, which Montesquieu exposes as disingenuous, dishonest, and double-dealing. The senate may have been "constant" but its constancy was mostly in the service of duplicity. Roman diplomacy had but one aim: the subjugation of other states and peoples, preferably under cover of "alliance."

The Romans may have been principally motivated by passion, not calculation, but Montesquieu subtly makes clear that—at least eventually—their "passion" was as much for money as for "pride." Roman devotion to the common good turns out to have been a kind of collective selfishness.<sup>15</sup> In international affairs, Rome was essentially a gang of thieves, robbing its neighbors and enriching itself.

And it is not clear that the Roman devotion to spoils was not present from the beginning. The very first sentence of the *Considerations* indirectly reveals that the physical city of Rome was "built to hold booty, cattle, and the fruits of the field." "Booty" is of course captured spoils, or, if we want to be less euphemistic, stolen goods. To borrow the language of the American Old West, the early Romans were cattle rustlers. One might try to say that booty taken in self-defense or just war should not be considered "stolen," but the

---

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 11.

further one delves into the *Considerations*, the harder it becomes to maintain the notion that Roman wars were either just or defensive.

#### REAP WHAT YE SOW

The most characteristic assertion of cycle theory is that success carries within itself the seeds of failure. We should not then be surprised that Montesquieu explicitly begins his account of Roman decline as early as chapter 5: “the war they waged against Antiochus is the true beginning of their corruption.” The reason? “The main weakness of the kingdom of Syria came from that of the court where the successors of Darius and not of Alexander reigned. The luxury, vanity, and indolence which, in all ages, have never left the courts of Asia, reigned especially at this one. The evil passed to the people, and to the soldiers, and became contagious even for the Romans.” In other words, conquest proved to be, at best, double-edged. Conquest brought power (for a time, as we shall see) and wealth (which, as we have already seen, is itself double-edged) but also alien, and corrosive, cultural practices.

Amazingly, by the end of chapter 7—with sixteen chapters and two-thirds of the text yet to come—Montesquieu declares the Roman project has reached its culmination: “Pompey...completed the splendid work of Rome’s grandeur. He joined an infinite number of countries to the body of its empire—which served the show of Roman magnificence more than its true power. And although it seemed, from placards carried in his triumph, that he had increased the public revenues by more than a third, power was not increased, and public liberty was only the more endangered.”

Note that by some traditional measures of grandeur—territory and wealth—Pompey *did* in fact augment Rome’s grandeur. But he did not increase its *power*. This apparently fine distinction requires some reflection, since if one defines “power” as the ability to coerce others, Rome remained very powerful. Many more conquests would follow Pompey’s. Yet Montesquieu indicates that none of those victories enlarged Rome’s *power*, which either stagnated or began to decline. We are perhaps to be reminded of Machiavelli’s warning in *Prince* 3 not to expand beyond the point at which conquests cease being profitable.

Why was “public liberty...endangered” by these conquests? A chief reason seems to be that the wealth they generated was no longer evenly or equitably distributed but was concentrated in the hands of a few. Early in the

book, in chapter 3—which is otherwise a “positive” chapter about the roots of Roman grandeur—Montesquieu anticipates this outcome:

It was the equal partition of lands that at first enabled Rome to rise from its lowly position; and this was obvious when it became corrupt.

It was a small republic when, after the Latins refused to contribute the troops they had promised, ten legions were raised in the city on the spot. “Today’s Rome,” says Livy, “even though the whole world cannot contain it, could hardly do as much if an enemy suddenly appeared before its walls. This is a certain indication that we have not become greater at all, and that we have only increased the luxury and riches that obsess us.”

“Tell me,” said Tiberius Gracchus to the nobles, “who is worth more: a citizen or a perpetual slave; a soldier, or a man useless for war? In order to have a few more acres of land than other citizens, do you wish to renounce the hope of conquering the rest of the world, or to place yourself in danger of seeing these lands you refuse us snatched away by enemies?”

We see several things at work in this passage. Rome’s power declines as its size and wealth increase. The admonition of Gracchus makes clear the role of the nobility’s avarice: for them to have more, average citizens had to have less. The concentration of wealth into the hands of a small, decadent elite weakened individual Romans and hence Roman armies. Thus, despite a much larger population, later Rome faced greater difficulty fielding soldiers than had the early republic. The cause—or one cause—was an obsession with “luxury and riches.”

In the Roman case, wealth was a direct consequence of success in war—that is, of the Romans’ *raison d’être*. It would seem, then, that Rome was fated to become corrupt, fated to fall. In chapter 9, in a passage that mirrors cycle theory, Montesquieu says this more or less explicitly: “What makes free states last a shorter time than others is that both the misfortunes and the successes they encounter almost always cause them to lose their freedom.” The title of this chapter—“Two Causes of Rome’s Ruin”—is one of only two in which the word “cause” appears. The two causes here under consideration are Rome’s expansion beyond Italy and the granting of citizenship to foreigners. The former, we have seen, further increased Rome’s wealth and exposed the Romans to foreign practices corrosive to liberty. It also elevated the status of Roman generals who, because of the great distances of their theaters of operation

from the capital, acted essentially as powers unto themselves.<sup>16</sup> Their soldiers, in turn, began to consider themselves servants not of the republic but of their particular general. These dynamics reinforced themselves. Far-flung generals ceased holding captured booty until it could be returned to Rome, instead distributing it to their troops to cement their loyalties; the troops then spent that booty on foreign luxuries that corrupted republican virtue.

As for the mass granting of citizenship, Montesquieu indicates that it was politically necessary, in the circumstances in which the Romans then found themselves, to avoid further civil strife and even civil war. Rome had after all long used the manpower of its “allies” to aid in its conquests and those “allies” naturally felt they were owed. But he also implies that far better would have been for Rome not to have created these circumstances in the first place. As for the result?

After this, Rome was no longer a city whose people had but a single spirit, a single love of liberty, a single hatred of tyranny—a city where the jealousy of the senate’s power and the prerogatives of the great, always mixed with respect, was only a love of equality. Once the peoples of Italy became its citizens, each city brought to Rome its genius, its particular interests, and its dependence on some great protector. The distracted city no longer formed a complete whole. And since citizens were such only by a kind of fiction, since they no longer had the same magistrates, the same walls, the same gods, the same temples, and the same graves, they no longer saw Rome with the same eyes, no longer had the same love of country, and Roman sentiments were no more.

Other causes were more spiritual. Montesquieu singles out Epicureanism for “tainting the heart and mind of the Romans” (chapter 10). He implies that the spread of this doctrine weakened the Romans’ attachment to their *patria* and undermined the inviolability of a Roman oath, on which the stability of Roman society had for so long depended.

#### THE CENTRALITY OF CAESAR

Thus far, the history of the Romans and the causes of their grandeur and of their decadence appear to comport rather neatly with classical cycle theory. However, as we reach the center of the *Considerations*, we encounter an enormous difference from cycle theory: in Rome, the cycle did not restart! Once back in the hands of monarchs, the state never reverted to aristocracy or

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Machiavelli, *Discourses* 3.24: “The Prolongation of Commands Made Rome Servile.”

democracy but remained a monarchy until its final dissolution. As Machiavelli puts it in *Discourses* 1.37, “never again was that city free.”

The “monarch” or “tyrant” who ended Rome’s freedom was of course Caesar. The centrality of Caesar to the *Considerations* can be seen in a number of ways. First, we have noted that the chronology presented in the book mostly proceeds in a straight line from beginning to end. However, Montesquieu continually shifts the “speed” at which his narrative moves. As a general matter, we may say that time passes very quickly at the beginning of the work, slows down toward the center, and then picks up speed again as we approach the end. The textual (as opposed to chronological) midpoint of the book is chapter 12, which divides the work into two “halves” of eleven chapters each, the first concerning the republic, the second the empire. Second, chapter 12 covers the shortest amount of time—a mere three years (44–42 BC)—of any chapter in the book. By contrast, the “fastest” chapter—chapter 23—covers some seven hundred years! In other words, Montesquieu has literally placed Caesar at the center of his book *and* devoted his “slowest” chapter to the immediate aftermath of Caesar’s assassination. Third, Montesquieu uses thirteen names of persons in chapter titles, for a total of fifteen mentions (Caesar and Antoninus are named twice each). Whether one counts this list of names as thirteen or fifteen, Caesar’s name is central. Fourth, there is another way to reckon the plan of the work’s twenty-three chapters. Montesquieu also explicitly subdivides six chapters; if one counts each subdivision as a chapter, there are thirty-two chapters overall. The sixteenth ends with Caesar’s death; the seventeenth begins with its aftermath.

By making Caesar the hinge-point of the *Considerations*, Montesquieu implies that Caesar was the hinge-point of Roman history. This observation perhaps sounds commonplace today. But we are entitled to ask whether that is so *because* of Montesquieu and the new understanding of Roman history (pioneered by Machiavelli) that he helped to create the common understanding, *our* understanding. Since Augustine’s *City of God*, the traditional account of Roman history—still very much alive in Montesquieu’s time—had been theological in nature and held that Roman conquests were Providentially ordained by God to pave the way for the fulfillment of His covenant via the preaching and self-sacrifice of Jesus, followed by the rapid spread of the Gospel throughout a politically unified world. In this understanding, the

hinge-point of Roman history is not the death (or life) of Caesar but the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ.<sup>17</sup>

Montesquieu never mentions this view. Indeed, he mentions “Providence” only twice. In chapter 3, he says that in modern times, if “Providence has placed” a “small state” in a “lowly position,” then it “cannot possibly rise by its own efforts.” That is, he attributes to “Providence” exactly the opposite effect claimed by the traditional understanding of Roman success: rather than helping small states expand, providence holds them down. In chapter 19, he invokes “Providence” to explain the alienation of the common people from heretical princes.

If this were not enough, we have recourse to Montesquieu’s assertion in chapter 1, quoted above, that the causes of political change themselves never change, a thought Montesquieu restates much more forcefully in chapter 18:

It is not chance that rules the world. Ask the Romans, who had a continuous sequence of successes when they were guided by a certain plan, and an uninterrupted sequence of reverses when they followed another. There are general causes, moral and physical, which act in every monarchy, elevating it, maintaining it, or hurling it to the ground. All accidents are controlled by these causes. And if the chance of one battle—that is, a particular cause—has brought a state to ruin, some general cause made it necessary for that state to perish from a single battle. In a word, the main trend draws with it all particular accidents.

The immediate context of that statement is an account of changes in Roman military practice from republican to imperial times—about as far removed from a theological account of Providence as one could imagine. Nonetheless, the thoughts expressed directly contradict any notion of a providential order governing this world and may stand as Montesquieu’s indirect yet forceful rejection of such a claim.

Rather than the product of Providence (or chance), Caesar represents the culmination of a kind of internal, natural necessity. Early in chapter 11, Montesquieu says that “since the republic necessarily had to perish, it was only a

---

<sup>17</sup> It is, I think, instructive to recall in this context the fact that not only is Caesar not blamed in Dante’s *Inferno*, Dante rather finds him “in his armor, falcon-eyed” in Hell’s First Circle, or Limbo, which—to say the least—does not appear to be altogether unpleasant. Caesar’s assassins, by contrast, are encountered last, in the Ninth Circle, being eternally gnawed by Satan along with Judas Iscariot. That the assassins of the pagan Caesar are explicitly joined with the betrayer of Christ while Caesar himself gets to enjoy his afterlife among the “virtuous pagans” is a striking illustration of the traditional understanding of Providence’s plan for Rome.

question of how, and by whom, it was to be overthrown.” Toward the end of that chapter, he writes that

finally, the republic was crushed. And we must not blame it on the ambition of certain individuals; we must blame it on man—a being whose greed for power keeps increasing the more he has of it, and who desires all only because he already possesses much.<sup>18</sup>

If Caesar and Pompey had thought like Cato, others would have thought like Caesar and Pompey; and the republic, destined to perish, would have been dragged to the precipice by another hand.

Man himself destroyed the Roman Republic; Caesar was just the vehicle.

But Caesar was a particularly *apt* vehicle, perhaps the most apt. Throughout the book’s first half, Montesquieu stresses the exceptionally warlike character of the Roman people and their institutions. At the end of chapter 10, he observes:

whatever the corruption of Rome, not every misfortune was introduced there. For the strength of its institutions had been such that it preserved its heroic valor and all of its application to war in the midst of riches, indolence and sensual pleasures—which, I believe, has happened to no other nation in the world.... In general, the Romans knew only the art of war, which was the sole path to magistracies and honors. Thus, the martial virtues remained after all the others were lost.

Caesar was thus in a very real sense the personification of Rome, the living embodiment of Roman virtue, above all military virtue. Caesar represents Rome as it were conquering itself. All the virtues that brought Rome to world domination came together in that one man. From that point on, the well-being of Rome would depend on both Roman virtue, which was in irreversible but slow decline, and on the virtues—or lack thereof—of the emperors.

This helps explain why the book slows so dramatically in its central chapters. The most important and notable thing about the whole history of Rome—about which we have the most to learn—is the transition from republic to empire, or from liberty to despotism. The *Considerations* presents the single greatest and deepest analysis of Caesarism—of the loss of liberty

---

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.37: “It is the verdict of the ancient writers that men are wont to worry in evil and to become bored with good, and that from both of these two passions the same effects arise. For whenever engaging in combat through necessity is taken from men they engage in combat through ambition, which is so powerful in human breasts that it never abandons them at whatever rank they rise to. The cause is that nature has created men so that they are able to desire everything and are unable to attain everything. So, since the desire is always greater than the power of acquiring, the result is discontent with what one possesses and a lack of satisfaction with it.”

following the loss of virtue and the transformation of formerly republican institutions into tyrannical-administrative ones—in the entire literature. The heart of the *Considerations* then is an analysis of the death of politics understood as dissent and contention, or ruling and being ruled in turn, in Aristotle's formulation, and its replacement with administration.<sup>19</sup> As we have already seen, "administration" may be more or less benign depending on the administrator; which is to say, at least in part on chance.

This analysis is vital because Caesarism is always a possibility—always a danger. Its original form was, on one hand, unique because of the uniqueness of the Roman regime and its historical situation. On the other hand, in being the product (at least in part) of human nature and natural necessity, Rome's transition to Caesarism has something to teach us about the nature of politics in all times and circumstances.

#### ROME AFTER CAESAR

The title of the *Considerations* promises a work that will explain the causes only of the Romans' "grandeur" and their "decadence." Strictly understood, this promise has been fulfilled by the end of the book's first half. For (as noted) Montesquieu explicitly says in chapter 7 that Rome's "grandeur" had by that point been "completed," while chapter 9 is dedicated to the "causes" of Rome's "ruin" and chapter 10 is entirely—and titularly—dedicated to the Romans' "corruption." Yet after all this, the book still soldiers on. Why?

It is not enough to answer "Because Rome still had fifteen centuries to go"—for that only raises again the question of why Montesquieu structured his book akin to a narrative rather than thematically. That Montesquieu finds the Roman Empire less interesting than the republic is indicated by the fact that he devotes roughly the same number of chapters and pages to each, despite the fact that the former lasted nearly four times as long as the latter. Rome after Caesar becomes a more or less typical despotism. Montesquieu in fact dispatches the entire last third of Roman history in one chapter because so little of note happened. Bad government, he seems to indicate, is the norm of human history and human life.

---

<sup>19</sup> According to Harry V. Jaffa, "The heart of the process whereby politics is replaced by administration is presented to us unforgettably in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*" (Jaffa, "The American Founding as the Best Regime: The Bonding of Civil and Religious Liberty," originally published as a Claremont Institute monograph [1990]; republished in *The Rediscovery of America: Essays by Harry V. Jaffa on the New Birth of Politics*, ed. Edward J. Erler and Ken Masugi [Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018], chap. 6).

So why treat the empire at all, in that case? The answer emerges from the context of the rest of the book. In fact, Montesquieu still has two other causes to explain: first, why, despite the Roman Empire's weakness and corruption, it nonetheless lasted as long as it did; and, second, what finally brought it down.

The final chapter of the *Considerations* is partially titled "Reason for the Duration of the Eastern Empire," but the very first paragraph speaks of "reasons," plural. The context makes clear that these reasons existed in spite of that empire's weakness; they propped up the empire despite itself:

Thus, while the empire was weighed down by a bad government, particular causes supported it. So today we see some European nations maintaining themselves, in spite of their weakness, by the treasuries of the Indies; we see the temporal states of the pope maintaining themselves by the respect in which their sovereign is held, and the corsairs of Barbary by the impediments they present to the commerce of the small nations, which makes them useful to the great ones.

In an ironic sense, we have come full circle from "positive" causes that gave rise to Roman success, to "negative" causes that brought down the republic, and back to "positive" causes that sustained the empire. Except that in the first case, the "positive" causes were causes of strength in a healthy body whereas in the third they are causes that (temporarily) sustain the life of a diseased body.

One such cause was the degradation of the Roman people, which made them easier for even—or especially—the vilest emperors to govern:

The people of Rome, who were called *plebs*, did not hate the worst emperors. After they had lost their power, and were no longer occupied with war, they had become the vilest of all peoples. They regarded commerce and the arts as things fit for slaves, and the distributions of grain that they received made them neglect the land. They had been accustomed to games and spectacles. When they no longer had tribunes to listen to or magistrates to elect, these useless things became necessities, and idleness increased their taste for them. Thus Caligula, Nero, Commodus, and Caracalla were lamented by the people because of their very madness, for they wildly loved what the people loved, and contributed with all their power and even their persons to the people's pleasures. For them these rulers were prodigal of all the riches of the empire, and when these were exhausted, the people—looking on untroubled while all the great families were being despoiled—enjoyed the fruits of the tyranny. And their joy was pure, for they found security in their own baseness. (chap. 15)

Another was the servility and corruption of the senate and of members of the upper classes, who no longer posed any threat to the imperial system:

After Caesar had vanquished the party of the republic, both his friends and his enemies in the senate agreed to remove all the limits the laws had set to his power and to confer excessive honors upon him. The former sought to please him, the latter to make him odious. Dio tells us that some went so far as to propose that he be permitted to enjoy all the women he pleased. This was the cause of his not distrusting the senate, and brought about his assassination. But it was also the reason, in the following reigns, why there was no act of flattery lacking a precedent or capable of revolting the mind. (chap. 14)

Not all the causes of the empire's longevity were quite so ignoble, however. Montesquieu has high praise for certain emperors—above all Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, and Julian—and some other figures, notably Belisarius, whose virtue bought the empire time and postponed the end. Yet even this praise indicates how fickle and unstable reliance on individuals really is. Great men, we have seen, can create great times, but great times inevitably give way to corrupt men and corrupt times. In such times, later great men might sometimes be able to make bad situations better but they will always lack the power to turn things around, not because they are not great but because their greatness is insufficient to overcome the underlying rot.

#### THE END(S)

But anything that can't go on forever, won't, and Montesquieu explains the falls of both the Western and Eastern Empires. He is almost—but not quite—silent on the spread of Christianity in the early empire. The first time he raises the topic (at the beginning of chapter 19), it is to cite a contemporaneous debate between Christians and pagans on who was more responsible for Rome's decline. Montesquieu does not explicitly take sides but it is probably not a coincidence that the third subheading of this chapter is "Reasons Why the Western Empire Was the First to Fall." Perhaps also he hopes we will remember what he had explicitly said in chapter 10 about the effects of the apolitical doctrine of Epicureanism on Roman virtue.

It is important to note that by identifying Christianity as a cause of the fall of the Western Empire, Montesquieu is not necessarily condemning Christianity *per se*. Indeed at a few points he seems to indicate a certain respect for tenets of the Christian faith. For instance, in chapter 15 he criticizes the Romans for "making sport of human nature in the person of their

children and their slaves” and says that “they could scarcely know the virtue we call humanity,” that is, a virtue that emerges in the West with Christianity. In chapter 19, he writes that “Saint Augustine *showed* that the city of heaven was different from this earthly city in which the ancient Romans, for some human virtues, had received rewards that were as vain as these virtues” (emphasis added). The word “showed” would seem to indicate an underlying agreement with Augustine’s judgment. In other words, Christianity can be both true (at least in part) *and* a cause of Roman decadence.

The specific reason Montesquieu cites for why the West fell first is that the northern barbarians, finding the East too well-guarded, bypassed it and continued west. But he also indicates that the Eastern emperors made alliances with said barbarians to encourage them to pillage elsewhere, and specifically redirected their attentions westward. The West, too weak to defend itself, invited the barbarians to settle in Roman lands, hoping that settlement would lead to peace. Instead the newcomers allied themselves with the military, already comprised of foreigners, and the West’s fate was sealed.

The Eastern Empire hung around for another thousand years despite its “disorders” (the topic of chapter 21) and “weakness” (chap. 22). Montesquieu cites many causes for its “destruction” (chap. 23), but one stands out. The importance of Christianity to Montesquieu’s narrative rises in the book’s closing chapters—in particular “Greek” Christianity, which Montesquieu depicts as less warlike, less political, more pacifistic, more anticommercial and above all more prone to internecine disputes (especially over esoteric points of doctrine) than its Western counterpart. One may say that Montesquieu’s “Greek” Christianity is truer to the tenets of the New Testament, strictly interpreted, than to Christianity as it developed later in the West, or that “Greek” Christianity is code for Christianity simply while Western Christianity is a more worldly Christianity, or a Christianity “interpreted according to virtue.”<sup>20</sup>

In any event, the Eastern Empire gradually became poor, unarmed, obsessed with the other world, unwilling to maintain order or punish any crime but heresy, and unwilling or unable to fight for itself. The East had only one recourse against the rising tide of an armed, confident Islam: retreat inward. Which it did, until the empire was “reduced to the suburbs of Constantinople” and fell at the first push.

---

<sup>20</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses* 2.2.

## MONTESQUIEU'S INTENT REVISITED

In explicating not merely the cycle of regimes, but the entire Roman journey through the cycle, Montesquieu means to teach both what is permanent and unavoidable in politics and what is within man's power to shape, if not control.

Montesquieu's theoretical intent for the *Considerations* is to revive awareness, and serious study, of the cycle of regimes. Rather than doing so in dry, thematic fashion, he appeals to a broader audience by taking in the entire sweep of Roman history—a subject of widespread fascination then as now. (The book is known to have inspired, for instance, Edward Gibbon.) The central theoretical lesson that I believe Montesquieu wishes to convey is that—contrary, perhaps, to the intent and hope of some earlier thinkers—the cycle has not been repealed or overcome. Indeed, Montesquieu insists it cannot be. Fundamental causes impel men to behave in certain ways that all but guarantee that human endeavors—even the most prudential and successful—will eventually plateau and then decay. No human society or political order can last forever because—as we have seen—success carries within itself the seeds of failure.

The cycle, we also recall, did not restart within Rome itself. But if we follow Machiavelli (*Discourses* 2.5) in understanding the concept of “regime” more broadly as a “sect” that includes more than one people and political entity, we see that the cycle *did* eventually restart. For how else to interpret the explorers, conquerors, settlers, scientists, and other men of daring who emerged in early modernity but as the beginning of something fundamentally new—a rising “sect” out to imprint its form on a pliant world?

I believe this is the key to understanding Montesquieu's practical intention for the *Considerations*: to nudge modernity in a moderate, positive direction. The cycle may be permanent and unchanging, but how we operate within the cycle is in certain respects up to us. Recall Montesquieu's statement from chapter 1 that the early Romans had a choice: “One of two things had to happen: either Rome would change its government, or it would remain a small and poor monarchy.” The Romans *chose* greatness and expansion over moderation and limits. In so choosing, they made inevitable what is not necessarily inevitable by nature.

“In the end,” writes Paul Rahe, “Montesquieu’s aim is to rob Rome of its allure.”<sup>21</sup> There can be little question that Montesquieu—for all his evident admiration for Roman virtue—judged the Roman conquest of the ancient world a disaster for man. It crushed liberty for centuries, homogenized or even eliminated formerly free and distinct peoples, and led to the rise of a priestly authority that held back both East and West for centuries.

Very late in the book (chap. 21), Montesquieu hints that the invention of printing combined with newspapers and the postal service have made world conquest, at least by Roman modes, less likely. It is, he says, harder to deceive than it used to be, hence a strict imitation of Roman diplomatic subterfuge is inadvisable and probably impossible.

But that does not necessarily mean that conquest by arms—the other essential component of Roman success—has become impossible, or that, even if it has, no state would dare try. Indeed, Montesquieu lived at a time when the most powerful European states—first Spain, then his native France—harbored ambitions for general and perhaps even universal conquest. To borrow terminology from *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu seems to have been concerned that the more or less benign and moderate monarchies of his time, based on the “principle” of “honor,” were trying to expand beyond prudent limits and might give way to immoderate despotism based on “fear.” In other words, the reasserted dominance of one European state or people over all the others might once again give rise to Caesarism, outwardly different in form, but at its core identical to the original.

By describing Rome’s transformation, Montesquieu paves the way for understanding Europe’s potential transformation and quietly urges moderns who face a choice similar to that of the early Romans to choose moderation.

---

<sup>21</sup> Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty*, 36; see also 92: the *Considerations* “show[s] that antiquity, which seems to the unsuspecting glance so grand and glorious, is upon close examination distasteful, ugly and grim.”