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Exotic economies and colonial history in Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois*

In *Ce que parler veut dire*, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu criticises the 'autonomisation' of language in structural linguistics and, more particularly, the paradigmatic status of this formally closed model of language in the human sciences. As he suggests, the model of spectatorship which is inherent to ethnology and anthropology renders these disciplines particularly susceptible to the tendency to erase the conditions of production and reception of their own discursive practices, as well as those of the ethnic groups they study. Maintaining that one cannot apply a closed linguistic system to the study of society without ending up in ideology or mythology, Bourdieu persuasively argues for a linguistics that combines what he calls 'économisme' — the formal closure of an economy of linguistic exchanges — with 'culturalisme' — a methodology which recognises the play of social forces and power relations in symbolic exchanges. By means of this analysis, Bourdieu asks anthropologists and their readers to address the role of history, or of historical differences in power, in shaping symbolic exchanges of all kinds. The final part of the book, entitled 'Analyses du discours', provides demonstrations of this sociolinguistic practice through a series of readings attentive to the historical forces which shape discourse. The last of these readings examines the scientific rhetoric of Montesquieu's attempts in *De l'esprit des lois* to account for cultural differences.

Bourdieu focuses on the notorious 'théorie des climats' which Montesquieu presents as an explanation of differences in mentalities and mores. Book XIV of *De l'esprit des lois*, which introduces, somewhat belatedly, the explanation of why the peoples of different geographic regions embrace different values and regulate themselves through different governments and laws, opens with the brief and now notorious account of an experiment which Montesquieu performed on a sheep's tongue. Examining the tongue through a microscope,

2. This reading first appeared in *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 25 (1983).
3. (Études complétées, ed. Daniel Oster (Paris 1964), p.614. All parenthetical page references in the text are to this edition. Page numbers 207 to 208 designate the Considerations sur les lois et les climats de l'Espagne: 265-266 the discussion on the causes that may affect the climate and the characteristics: 525-795 *De l'esprit des lois*; and 795-868 the unpublished fragments of *De l'esprit des lois*.
Montesquieu remarks that when frozen, the sensory organs or taste buds retract and the tongue stiffens. When warmed, the taste buds expand and the tongue appears relaxed and dilated. This humble beginning in scientific experiment marks the point of departure for a series of claims concerning the effects of climatic differences on human behavior. Climatic differences result in physiological differences which in turn generate moral and political variations. Peoples of the warm climates of the Midi are said to have loose bodily fibres which slow down the flow of blood between the heart and the organs. As a result, they are physically weak and lack both energy and courage. On the other hand, because their sensory organs are dilated, peoples indigenous to southern climates are sensually responsive and governed by sexual appetite (p. 614). The semantic overlap between literal and figurative meanings facilitates at many points the passage from the physical to the moral sphere: sensory entails sensual while 'redilche' (relaxed or slack) entails 'lâche' (cowardly). In books xiv and xv these moral conclusions are translated into the political sphere with the claim that, since the peoples du Midi are weak and cowardly, they readily accept the yoke of political despotism and civil slavery: freedom is not at issue for them in the way that it is for vigorous and active Northerners. In book xvi, a further set of demographic factors, again related to climate, is added to account for the domestic servitude of women in southern climates—the notorious oriental structures of polygamy and the seraglio. It is with the discussion of political structures and, in particular, of the domestic arrangements associated with them that the geographical terms 'norad' and 'sud' find themselves translated into the terms 'Orient' and 'Occident' which to present-day readers appear more patent figural.

Bourdieu's interest lies in this overlap between science and myths, for he wants to show that the scientific coherence of the opposition between North and South is doubled and sustained by a second form of coherence, which can be described as phantasmal or mythological, since it reflects the workings of both a personal and a cultural unconscious. This principle is grounded in concerns about sex and sexuality, notably in the association of femininity with passivity, and a 'softness' of both muscularity (bodily fibres) and morals. Had Bourdieu turned to the Essai sur les causes qui peuvent afféter les esprits et les caractères, the essay on causality which Montesquieu probably wrote just before De l'esprit des lois, he would have found further confirmation of his claim that the oppositional construction of Orient and Occident is predicated on that of sexual difference. In the Essai, Montesquieu attributes to all women—northern as well as southern—the same loose bodily fibres and sensual receptiveness attributed in De l'esprit des lois to the men of the Midi, stating that les femmes ont les fibres plus molles, plus lâches, plus flexibles, plus délicates que celles des hommes (p. 344). In what follows, he directly relates these differences in the quality of bodily fibres to the possession—or lack—of the male sexual organ.

Bourdieu's reading of the 'théorie des climats' rightly suggests that the menace of oriental despotism in eighteenth-century French fiction and political theory is ineffectively tied to the threat of a loss of sexual difference and virility. Behind the scientific rhetoric of physiology, he reads a mythical sexuality, in which despotism, tied to excessive contact with women in the harem, is viewed as the prelude to a loss of virility. Thus, Bourdieu claims that Montesquieu 'states somewhere' that 'l’homme est comme un ressort qui va mieux plus il est bandé', playing on the plurality of meanings of 'bandé', which signifies both to be wound up or taut, and to have an erection.

For Bourdieu, the problem with the 'theory of climates' is that it is just that: a 'theory', or overarching analytic paradigm, which erases history, and with it the possibility of historical action and change: 'une “théorie” qui a pour effet [...] de faire disparaître l’histoire en réduisant le déterminisme historique, qui laisse place à l’action historique, au déterminisme physique, qui conduit à accepter ou à justifier l’ordre établi.' In this claim, we witness the reiteration of Bourdieu's primary concern, the erasure of historical forces in structural linguistics and structural anthropology. His own reading strives to reintroject the historical dimension by gesturing toward the male-female and North-South power relations occulted—and thereby consecrated—by the theory of climates.

In a dense and interesting article, Marie-Claire Vallois has built upon Bourdieu's reading in order to provide a more thoroughgoing analysis of the fear of a loss of sexual difference implicated in Western representations of sexual relations in the oriental seraglio. She echoes Bourdieu's view that the scientific rhetoric which establishes a coherent opposition between Orient and Occident, man and woman, constitutes an erasure of history and historical causality: C'est cette occultation du déterminisme historique et son remplacement par le déterminisme physique, en ce qui concerne la redistribution des rôles masculins et féminins en termes de lieu, d’space et d’anatomie, qu’il nous importe de retracer. I would like to draw attention to a curious parallel.

4. Since the Essai refers at points to book xiv of De l'esprit des lois, there appears to be a degree of overlap in the writing of the two works.
5. Ce qui parler veut lire, p. 231.
6. Ce qui parler veut lire, p. 231.
7. Ce qui parler veut lire, p. 233.
Madeleine Dobie

between the critical reading of Vaillois and Bourdieu, and what Montesquieu himself says about symbolic exchanges in his writing on commerce and colonial establishments. For in addressing the question of commercial exchange in the historical context of unequal power relations, Montesquieu too manifests considerable anxiety about the formalism of sign systems which, because they lack historical substance, fail to be properly referential.

This concern is first formulated in the text entitled *Considérations sur les richesses de l’Espagne*, believed to date to 1758, but published until much of its argument was incorporated into books XIX and XXII of *De l’esprit des lois*. This book is located in the fourth part of the work, which is primarily devoted to a discussion of commerce, but which evolves into a discussion of demography and sexual reproduction. In both *Considérations* and *De l’esprit des lois*, Montesquieu reflects on the economy of Spain in the wake of colonial expansion, glutted with gold and silver from its possessions in the New World. He cites the famous bankruptcy of Philip II as evidence that, rather than boosting the Spanish economy, the influx of precious metals ruined Spain, claiming that ‘il y avait un vice intérieur et physique dans la nature de ces richesses, qui les rendait vaines; et ce vice augmenta tous les jours’ (p. 674). The optimistic tone of this passage, which represents gold and silver as an internal and physical vice, a cancer or virus spreading throughout the healthy body politic, is, as we shall see, characteristic of Montesquieu’s approach to colonial economy.

The real problem for Montesquieu seems to derive from the fact that ‘pour l’argent sont une richesse de fiction ou de signe. Ces signes sont très durables et se détruisent peu […] Plus ils se multiplient, plus ils perdent de leur prix, parce qu’ils représentent moins de choses’ (p. 674). This passage, which represents gold and silver as signs, and indeed as fictions of wealth, must be understood in relation to the discussion of the commercial use of coins and money which takes up the following book (XXVI). Here it is claimed that gold and silver are signs of merchandise, selected for their rarity and durability (p. 676). The value of gold is said to be fixed by the proportion between all the goods in the world market and all the gold in circulation at any one time (p. 678). For every thing in the world there is a corresponding sign, and vice versa. However, this transparent representationality between two closed totalities – merchandise and gold, things and signs – is problematised when Montesquieu reflects that it is also possible for coins to become signs of gold (or signs of signs) and for paper money to become the sign of coins: ‘le papier est un signe de la valeur de l’argent; et, lorsqu’il est bon, il le représente tellement, que, quant à l’effet, il n’y a point de différence’ (p. 676). With the substitution of sign for thing and the transmission of causal efficacy from thing to sign, we witness the emergence of gold and coins as simulacra which destabilise the oppositional equivalence between the real and its representation.

Still more disturbingly, Montesquieu suggests that in the payment of debts in the Roman Empire, goods actually became a sign of the money owed, so that things became the signs of signs (p. 678), while in intermonetary exchange, money generally becomes the sign of a sign and signifies itself: ‘non seulement l’argent est un signe des choses, il est encore un signe de l’argent, et représente l’argent’ (p. 677). However, the potential abyss constituted by the emergence of simulacra and by the self-referentiality of signs can be avoided, provided that signs continue to bear some relation to the things they represent. Unsurprisingly, Montesquieu argues that this can only happen in a moderate government, a republic or monarchy which fosters industry and commerce, or in other words, production as well as exchange. It is never the case in a despotism, in which the economy is perennially unstable and the prince liable to appropriate all the goods: ‘à l’égard du gouvernement despotique, ce serait un prodige si les choses y représentaient leur signe: la tyrannie et la méfiance font que tout le monde y enterré son argent: les choses n’y représentent donc point l’argent’ (p. 678). One notes that in this passage condemning the instability of despotism, things are rather surprisingly supposed to represent signs, rather than vice versa.

Michel Foucault characterises the *âge classique*, stretching from the mid-seventeenth to the early nineteenth century, as the ‘age of signs’, the age in which, across many bodies of thought, signs were detached from their referents, but also presumed to enjoy a transparent, one-to-one referential function in relation to them. In discussing monarchical exchange, Foucault argues that before the seventeenth century, when it was supposed that signification depended on the resemblance between sign and referent, gold and silver were presumed to signify wealth because of their own inherent value. By contrast, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was above all the function of exchange which was held to determine the worth of these metals. Foucault calls this view ‘mercantilisme’, a term which suggests a relationship between this change in attitude and the spread of international commerce. In fact, Foucault ultimately argues that in this period, the relationship between signs and referents is a circular one. Money constitutes wealth because it is a sign, but it functions as a sign because it is valuable. It is this organic connection between sign and referent that sustains the exact equivalence of representation. Foucault ties this circularity to the idea that: economic structures are modelled on physiology, and cites an Austrian source, Hornbeck, who states that gold

and silver 'sont le plus pur de notre sang, la moelle de nos forces'. As we shall see, this organism is widespread in eighteenth-century political economy and determined Montesquieu's approach to the colonies and to exchange.

Foucault claims that we witness the emergence over the eighteenth century of two parallel yet divergent trends in thinking about money. On the one hand are the 'partisans' of money as a sign, including Montesquieu, the chevalier de Jaucourt, and John Law, the Scottish banker whose introduction of 'junk bonds' in overseas trading companies ruined many investors during the Regency. On the other side are Diderot, Destutt de Tracy and Turgot, who refuse to see the value of money as a fiction. The collapse of Law's system was influential in persuading Turgot, during his ministry later in the century, to restabilise the weight and value of French coinage.

Foucault's characterisation of Montesquieu is in fact quite sketchy. Whereas it is true to say that he is a 'partisan' of money as a sign to the extent that he describes gold, silver and money as signs or fictions of goods, there is clearly a sense in which his thought actually inscribes the historical trajectory from sixteenth- to eighteenth-century economics as represented by Foucault. As we recall, Montesquieu claims that the signifying function of gold and silver was at first grounded in the purity and durability of these metals, and that it was only later that it came to operate independently. Moreover, as we shall see, Montesquieu's approach to the wealth of Spain reveals an important anxiety about the lack of organic connection between sign and referent. We could express similar reservations about Foucault's characterisation of Jaucourt, whose Encyclopédie article, 'Monnaie', vigorously refuses Locke's position that the value of gold and silver is simply 'imaginary' and comes down to exchange value. For Jaucourt, as for Montesquieu, the value of gold is intrinsic rather than arbitrary or dictated by 'autorité publique'. When gold and silver become mere signs, rather than symbols bearing an organic connection to wealth through their durability and rarity, the circular economy of representations begins to unravel. Indeed, I would argue that both Montesquieu and Jaucourt are 'partisans' of the kind of circularity identified by Foucault, in which the representation function of signs is guaranteed by an organic connection to things. We shall see that for both writers, representation, and, as a result, the continuity of economic exchanges, are disrupted by the appearance of gold and silver from the New World, because this sudden influx of precious metals underscores the arbitrary or imaginary quality of signs, the fact that their

signification is dependent on a system of exchanges resembling a linguistic system, rather than on inherent or independent value.

Interestingly, Foucault's brief discussion of European reactions to the arrival of precious metals from the New World suggests that this influx was not generally perceived as a problem. Rather, he claims, it was believed that the influx would stimulate economic growth. The favourable attitude identified by Foucault is one which reflects the dearness of metals and coins in France during the early eighteenth century, the effects of which were deflation, the slowing of the economy and the often disastrous circulation of paper money and rents of all kinds, of which Law's system has become the emblem. However, Montesquieu focuses on the financial history of seventeenth-century Spain, rather than on contemporary France. Theorising about what is clearly a colonial economy, he takes the opposite position. In his view, the influx of precious metals from the New World, which is portrayed as an influx of signs detached from their referents, constitutes a threat rather than a boost to the metropolitan economy. This is in fact also the position of Jaucourt, who attributes European inflation since the sixteenth century to the discovery of the West Indies.

According to Montesquieu, the sudden influx of gold and silver -- or signs -- into Spain following its conquest of South America resulted in a collapse of the representational equivalence which had existed, leading to massive inflation. Not only was gold worth far less than it had previously been, but the Spaniards had to spend increasingly large sums of money in order to extract it. Moreover, as we recall from book xxii, gold is durable; it does not wear out, necessitating further production, nor, according to Montesquieu, does it feed back into the economy, stimulating the production of real goods (p. 674). Thus, Montesquieu concludes that 'c'est une mauvaise espèce de richesses qu'un trésor d'argent. Le moindre qui veut pas de l'industrie de la nation, du nombre de ses habitants, et de la culture de ses terres' (p. 675).

Montesquieu's analysis of the role of the Spanish economy through the sudden importation of foreign gold and silver needs to be considered in relation to the broader issue of his attitude toward the commercial practices and social policies linked to the establishment of colonies, because the two are closely connected, both on the empirical level and in terms of what Bourdieu might call the 'fantastic' dimension of his approach to international trade. In her recent book on Montesquieu's liberalism in the Lettres persanes, Diana Schaub claims that 'judged by the anti-imperialist litmus-test, Montesquieu (despite

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being a dead, white, European male) turns the right color.31 This vindication
clearly represents an oversimplification of Montesquieu's writing on the issue
of colonialism and on the related question of slavery. While it is true that he
at times condemns the abuses of colonialism and slavery from a moral perspec-
tive, this approach is not sustained throughout De l'esprit des lois.32 Although
the text sometimes criticizes both institutions from the perspective of natural
law, declared to be inimical to all forms of slavery and many forms of conquest,
the condemnation is more typically grounded in arguments about political
economy.33 Thus, if De l'esprit des lois paints the establishment of colonies and
slavery in a negative light, it is primarily for economic and demographic
reasons. This mode of censure does, however, have a polemical dimension,
because it 'demonstrates' that these forms of economic exploitation are in fact
counter-productive. In this sense, the analysis of slavery resembles that of
the sexual economy of oriental despotism, repeatedly shown to defeat its own
purpose, and to culminate in sterility and homosexuality. Montesquieu's
recourse to political economy must also, however, be attributed to the structure
or systemic nature of De l'esprit des lois, which, despite the intermittent
assertion of value judgements, attempts to approach human reality in terms of
economics—circular sets of relationships which interconnect physical, moral
and political phenomena.34 The utility of both colonies and the slaves necessary
to their preservation are weighed in terms of their relation to factors such as
culture and the nature of the metropolitan government, rather than evaluated
independently from a moral meta-perspective. As Jean Starobinski suggests,
'Une loi qui paraît injuste à la raison théorique et qu'on pourrait être têtu de
corriger au nom du Droit naturel, est en réalité le produit d'une longue série
de causes et d'effets [...] on ne saurait la changer sans contrecarrer du même
coup l'esprit général de la nation'.35 Given that the very structure of De l'esprit
des lois underscores the interrelatedness of a variety of causal agents, it is

14. Ernée libérale: women and revolution in Montesquieu's Persian letters (London and Lanham,
15. See, for example, Mes pouvoirs, ch. 22, in which slavery is declared 'contre le droit naturel,
par lequel tous les hommes reçoivent libres et indépendants' (Œuvres complètes, p. 1424). De l'esprit
des lois, book xvi, ch. 1, states that '[l]'esclavage n'est pas bon de sa nature, une de ses plus
moraux condamnations. Book xvi, 'Du droit de la conquête', states (significantly for our argument)
that the form of conquest most in conformity with natural law is that which conserves rather
than destroys the conquered people (p. 140).
16. See book xvi, ch. 2, p. 619) for a condemnation of slavery grounded in natural law within
De l'esprit des lois.
17. There is extensive debate about the 'prescriptive' versus 'descriptive' nature of the text;
Paul Vialleux provides a nuanced account of the issues involved in Montesquieu's De l'esprit des lois
ou la raison impérieuse (Paris 1977), ch. 2.

Exotic economies and colonial history on Montesquieu's 'De l'esprit des lois'
inaccurate to speak, as Bourdieu and Vallois do, of 'physical determinism' in
Montesquieu, because the physical world is given as only one of many causal
factors.36 In this respect, Montesquieu's social theory diverges from that of
Hobbes and other predecessors, by approaching social structures as parts of a
pre-constituted and complex puzzle, rather than through a narrative of origins.
In other words, Montesquieu's model is that of economy rather than the
traditionally historical narrative of origins.

A reading along the lines established by Bourdieu can, however, be brought
into play here, since behind the opposition to colonies which is couched in
economic terms, we can discern the mythical coherence of a reflection on the
body, in the form of an organicist theory of the state or body politic. Unlike
Bourdieu, I do not think that this metaphor can be circumscribed as a
fantasticomorph with the sexual body. Rather, the implicit organicism of
Montesquieu's discussion of colonial economy appears to draw on a much
broader metaphor of the body, which reflects concerns about self-preservation,
propagation, energy and contamination, as well as anxiety about sterility and
sexual reproduction. Colonial encounter is, therefore, not represented simply
in accordance with a metaphor of forced intercourse, or rape, but with regard
for the broader conservation and health of both metropolis and colony. The
line separating 'science' from 'fantasm' is in fact quite hard to trace here:
Montesquieu's view that societies constitute substantive wholes resembling
those found in the natural world anticipates the prominent and respectable
model of organicism in nineteenth- and twentieth-century social science.
However, rather than simply accepting physical science as a legitimizing model
for social science, it is of course important to take up the reins of Bourdieu's
critical approach to scientific rhetoric when tracing its origins in eighteenth-
century theory. In Montesquieu, who we may see as the precursor of such
avowed organicists as Comte and Durkheim, the implicit recourse to metaphors
of the body, health and sexuality, can be seen to underlie the empirical and
scientific approach to social structures rather than vice versa. In this sense,

19. Bourdieu makes a point that merits more developed discussion. He refers to the 'organic
unity' of De l'esprit des lois, but then asks whether the correspondence between theories of
government and of climate does not signify that the theory of climates grounds in its mythical
extent the whole of Montesquieu's theory, and cites book xvi, ch. 14, 'L'Empire du climat
est le premier de tous les empires', as evidence for this view (Ce que penser veut dire). This
suggestion ignores not only the fact that in the first few books of De l'esprit des lois, the forms of
government are given as primary, and that the theory of climates is presented for the first time
as late as book xiv, but more importantly the organic unity of the work, which Bourdieu
himself recognizes.
science is indeed doubly by what we might term an unconscious principle of coherence. The body is of course a common metaphor in political theory. Whereas the trope of the ‘body politic’ had always presented the hierarchical relationship of the head to the various parts and organs as equivalent to the relationship between the king and the various estates, I would argue that eighteenth-century usage draws on the metaphor of the body in a new and different way, in order to represent the state as an economy. In this period, the metaphor of the body politic evolves into that of the political organism, a quintessentially organic structure, conceived not so much in hierarchical terms as on a model of flow and exchange. This evolution can be seen to reflect or parallel developments in political thought in an age of international trade.

To cite a prominent example, in ‘Economie politique’, the most politicised article he wrote for the Encyclopédie, Rousseau first defines ‘économie’ by a domestic metaphor as ‘la grande famille qui est l’état’, and then proceeds to refer to the ‘corps politique’ as ‘un corps vivant, organisé et semblable à celui de l’homme’. Rather like Hornick, the seventeenth-century author cited by Michel Foucault, he represents ‘finance’ as the blood, ‘qu’une sage économie, en faisant les fonctions du cœur, renvoie distribuer par tout le corps la nourriture et la vie’. In fact, Rousseau maintains that the economy is much more like a body than a family, for whereas the aim of the latter should be to increase its wealth, so that it may be divided between several children, the aim of the former should be to preserve or maintain itself in its existing proportions. In his discussion of the particularities of colonial economy, Rousseau follows Montesquieu’s analysis very closely, stating that conquest has disastrous consequences for the state, because production in one location and consumption in another invariably has a destabilising effect. In other words, Rousseau rejects the disruption of the organic contiguity and continuity binding production and consumption.

In Montesquieu’s analysis too, the economic failure of conquest and colonisation seems to stem from the lack of an organic connection between the metropolis and the colony and the wealth it generates. Spain’s relationship to the Americas, which supplies Montesquieu with his primary model of colonial economy, is catastrophic because it is organic neither in the temporal sense – it did not develop slowly over time – nor in the physical or bodily sense which doubles Montesquieu’s thinking on this subject. I would like to outline several different aspects of Montesquieu’s reflection on colonies to illustrate the workings of organicism.

Montesquieu’s analysis of colonies and colonisation

Physical separation

The worst kind of colonies are said to be those which are geographically removed from the metropolis, and the best, those which are close to it; thus the Considérations sur les richesses de l’Espagne states that the ‘grand éloignement’ of America places it outside the sphere of Spain’s power (p. 209). In one of the unpublished fragments of De l’esprit des lois which deal with colonies, Montesquieu makes a direct link between distance and the weakening of a body: ‘le monarque qui envoie des colonies ne fait que se donner des états très éloignés, qui affaiblissent le corps de sa monarchie’ (p. 798, my italics). If, by contrast, Montesquieu finds that colonies work best when the colonising nation is a small republic, it is because those nations have a large number of inhabitants in proportion to their surface area, and can afford to send surplus population to live in the colonies. Not only does this transfer not culminate in depopulation, considered a serious threat in eighteenth-century political thought, but the colonists mingle with the colonised, a process supposed to break down the physical barriers between the two groups (p. 798). Montesquieu goes so far as to suggest that it would have been desirable for one Indian family to move to Spain for every Spanish family that had settled in the Indies (p. 799). The improbability of any such exchange indicates the degree to which the reflection occurs in economic rather than historical terms.

Miscegenation: the reduction of difference

We can nevertheless discover parallel theories about miscegenation in other eighteenth-century political economists, for example, in Raynal’s Histoire des deux Indes, the eighteenth-century text which provides the most thorough-going analysis of colonial practices and their consequences. Raynal’s debt to Montesquieu’s analysis is obvious.
Madeleine Dobie

Exotic economies and colonial history in Montesquieu’s ‘De l’esprit des lois’

European Enlightenment. The Creoles themselves are credited with a revolutionary potential to transform the world not possessed by any of the existing racial groups: ‘Il s‘arrive quelque heureux événement dans le monde, ce sera par l’Amérique’. However, shortly after this prophetic reflection that America, having been destroyed by the Old World, will one day flourish and rule over its oppressors, the author urges the Creoles to travel to Europe in order to learn from its history and indeed its ancient mores: ‘Jeunes Créoles, venez vous exercer en Europe; y pratiquer ce que nous enseignons; y recueillir dans les restes précieux de nos anciens mœurs, cette vigueur que nous avons perdue’. He proceeds to exhort them to leave behind not only their slaves, who can only degrade them, but also the ‘éducation de tyrannie, de mollesse et de vice que vous donne l’habitude de vivre avec des esclaves’. We can recognise here the reappearance of Montesquieu’s theory of climates, and its ties to forms of government and to degrees of civil freedom. America is said to be ruled by tyranny — and this probably refers to European government — but also by ‘mollesse’ and ‘vice’, terms which recall Montesquieu’s characterisation of oriental despotism and the mali. This conclusion is borne out by the end of the passage, which argues that ‘L’Amérique a véri toutes les sources de la corruption sur l’Europe. Pour achever sa vengeance, il faut qu’elle en tire tous les instruments de sa prospérité’. By a curious return, it is America which is represented as the source of Europe’s decline — we recall Montesquieu’s analysis of the effects of an influx of ill-gotten gold — moreover, America’s revenge is said to lie in prospering on European terms, or in taking over the reins of the European cultural achievement. In a similar vein, Montesquieu himself claims that in order for colonies to be successful, the colony must have the same form of government as the metropole (p.790). Obviously, there is no suggestion that the coloniser might adopt the form of government of the colonised.

The danger of cultural encounters to both coloniser and colonised seems to arise in a mid-point between the absence of intercultural encounter and full miscegenation. At the final point of racial mixing, the term ‘commerce’, which in the eighteenth century designates not only trade but also conversation or sociability and sexual intercourse, has assumed its sexual as well as its economic meaning, and is seen to lead to both production and reproduction. As long as the conquered state subsists as the ‘other’ of the ‘self’, bound to it by commercial ties yet not identical with it, the relationship is considered detri-

23. The multi-volume Histoire philosophique et politique des Établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes is, of course, a collaborative work which involved, among others, Denis Diderot. Therefore the text must to some degree be considered polyphonic and, indeed, differences of perspective do manifest themselves over the course of the text. However, it is possible to refer to recurrent strains of thought, many of which show the influence of Montesquieu. All references are to the Pellet edition (Geneva 1760).

24. Book IV, ch.1, v.4. One could also cite earlier references to the jealousy and insolence of Creole women.
ment to the health of the metropolis, and threatens to destroy it. For example, we have noted how the sudden influx of gold into the Spanish economy is depicted as the invasion of a foreign body or, as Montesquieu puts it in *book xxiii of De l'esprit des lois*, a 'vice intérieur'. It is not simply because of their status as signs that gold and silver are perceived as a threat to the economy. Montesquieu is careful to cite the counter-examples of Germany and Hungary to show that domestic mines can stimulate industry in surrounding areas (p.675):

> mon raisonnement ne porte pas sur toutes les mines; celles d'Allemagne et de Hongrie, d'où l'on ne reçoit que peu de chose au-delà des frais sont très utiles. Elles se trouvent dans l'état principal; elles y occupent plusieurs milliers d'hommes qui y consomment les deniers surabondants; elles sont proprement une manufacture du pays.

In these cases, where production and consumption occur in the same location, signs are immediately translated into things and result in 'manufacture'. Rather, it is when mines are foreign and distant, and when their wealth has been suddenly acquired, that they prove harmful to the economy. In other words, it is the external and accidental gold that threatens to become a 'vice intérieur' (p.674). Interestingly, the expression 'vice intérieur' is used again a few chapters later to refer to bad governments, primarily despotic governments, which undermine the nation's health from within, incurring depopulation and desertification.

**Depopulation and desertification**

Depopulation, which, as I have suggested, is a predominant concern of eighteenth-century political thinkers, is presented as one of the first effects of the establishment of colonies. I would suggest once again that the concern with depopulation must be addressed in the context of the broad metaphorical relationship between state and body. One of the unpublished fragments on colonies in *De l'esprit des lois* maintains that 'comme les pays gouvernés par un seul sont ordinairement moins peuplés que les autres, les colonies achèvent la dépopulation' (p.798). The need to send able-bodied subjects to defend a conquest prolongs the exhausting effects of war and conquest on the state. In a number of passages, the effects of the establishment of colonies are represented as a more or less literal 'draining' of the resources of the metropolis into the colony. For example, the relationship between Spain and its colonies in the Indies is given as that of 'accessory to principle', terms which resonate

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32. One of Foucault's insights is that the circulation of money was directly linked to harvests and thus to depopulation, which explains the constant juxtaposition of fears over the circulation of wealth and concern about depopulation (*Les Mots et les choses*, p.198).
designating coloniser and colonised points to the fact that on the fantastastic and rhetorical levels, the two now constitute a single unwieldy body. When a nation like Spain suddenly expands in the wake of conquest, it is as though it had gained an unmanageable amount of weight, and been transformed into a distended and bloated form which exhibits only the weakest form of organisation: despotic government. If we return to the theory of climates and their effects on the organism, it seems possible to hypothesise that if the state is modelled on the organism, the increase in size of an empire would correspond to a 'relaxation' of the bodily fibres, and thus to a slowing down of transmissions between heart and organs or court and provinces.

World health

Lastly, Montesquieu's theory that colonial encounters generally prove detrimental to the healthy organisation of both parties must also be related to his fragmented reflections on global medical history. In the Lettres persanes (letter cxxxi), Usbeck makes the general claim that 'tous les malades transportés dans un autre pays, nous devenons malades'. Indeed, the Persian traveller had been complaining about the alteration of his own health from the moment he arrived in France (letter xxvii). In letter cxxxi, he launches into a full-blown history of the transportation of peoples in order to demonstrate that it is always counter-productive, resulting in the annihilation of the nation that is displaced rather than in the repopulation of deserted territories.

In book xvi of De l'esprit des lois—which sets forth the theory of climates—the international spread of disease is directly attributed to travel and, more particularly, to travel which is motivated by imperialism. Montesquieu claims that 'les croisades nous ont apparié la lèpre', and that leprosy reached Palestine itself long before as a result of the conquests of the Greek emperors (p. 62). More recently, 'une maladie inconnue à nos pères, passa du nouveau monde dans celui-ci, et vint attaquer la nature humaine jusque dans la source de la vie et des plaisirs' (p. 617). Syphilis is particularly pernicious because it attacks reproduction, and over the long term threatens depopulation on a massive scale. Once again, conquest and colonialism are held responsible for the spread of the disease: 'ce fut la soif de l'or qui perpétua cette maladie, on alla sans cesse en Amérique et on en rapporta sans cesse de nouveaux levains' (p. 617). The organism's figural thirst for gold leads to the ingestion of a foreign body which attacks its capacity to reproduce and even to maintain itself.33

33. Compare the Histoire des deux Indies, book xii, ch. xi, vi; 274, on how Creoles have triumphed over these international diseases.

Exotic economies and colonial history in Montesquieu's 'De l'esprit des lois'

It would now seem possible to provide a more specific characterisation of the situations in which intercultural encounter proves detrimental. Whenever the encounter between two cultures takes the form of radical inequality, so that there is domination without true commerce or exchange, then it is an unhealthy and doomed relationship. The lack of commerce in the case of the New World is illustrated by Montesquieu's insistence that there is absolutely no market for European goods there. The precious metals which are mined in the Indies are often applied to commerce with the East Indies, but here, too, there is no market for European manufacture, since the indigenous populations of the East Indies are virtually self-sufficient (p. 674). The Europeans, and in particular the Spaniards, are thus engaged in a one-sided commercial relationship. The stakes of this European trade deficit are raised when we consider that the term 'commerce' regularly refers to social and sexual spheres as well as to economics. The absence of true commerce and exchange is the failure of two cultures to mix and to reproduce in either mercantile or sexual terms.

The problem of this one-sided relationship could also be stated as that of the relationship between master and slave, an important cautionary model in eighteenth-century political liberalism. As Marie-Claire Vallois suggests, for Montesquieu the relationship between master and slave is inherently negative and unstable. Thus, when discussing slavery in De l'esprit des lois, he counsels against harsh practices and punishments which, by accentuating the gulf between master and slave, generally lead to revolt (p. 623). This discussion also gives voice to the common view that the master risks assuming the debased moral profile of his slave. This concern reappears in the Histoire des deux Indes, in which, as we recall, the Creoles are advised to abandon their slaves, 'd'ont l'abrutissement ne vous inspire aucun des sentiments de grandeur et de vertu qui font naître les peuples célèbres'.34 It would appear that for Montesquieu, the 'master-slave dialectic' is a relationship of pure reversibility, in which the master risks turning into the slave and—perhaps more alarmingly—the slave could take the place of the master. Vallois has shown how this reversibility also characterises the relationship between men and women, to the extent that it is that of a master to his slaves. Oriental despotism, in which the despot enjoys unlimited power over a population of female slaves, culminates in a loss of difference, for the master is invariably feminised by his situation and ends up as the slave of his slaves.35 It is unsurprising, given the prevalence of bodily

34. Book xi, ch. xi, vi, 273.
35. "Rèverie orientale et géopolitique", p. 618, see also Lettres persanes, letter xxi, in which Zobe荐ues her husband with the thought that 'dans la prison immense où tu me retiens, je suis plus libre que toi.'
metaphors deployed in the treatment of this cluster of topics, that reversibility is frequently depicted as a form of contamination. In book XV of De l'esprit des lois, we find slavery condemned on the grounds that the master 'construit avec ses esclaves toutes sortes de mauvaises habitudes' (p.61, my italics) and ultimately loses all moral virtue. Again, it is primarily the unequal relationship which is new and unprecedented, or the bond which has not developed organically, which does the most damage and which threatens contagion. In despotism, which has a long tradition of civil bondage and where there is a generalised lack of political freedom, slavery does not deviate from the accepted norms of behaviour and is therefore said to be far less harmful.

In cases of intercultural encounter, lack of organic connection between the two participants - the absence of bodily connectedness as of the slow, organic growth of a relationship - is held responsible for the degeneration of the body politic through the collapse of its organisation or economy. The influx of gold and silver into the Spanish economy exemplifies this danger because as signs or 'fictions' they may easily be detached from their referents, and operate in a way that is inimical to the community of history as to the material coherence of the economy, disrupting the contiguity of production and consumption. South American gold and silver have no history either in Europe or in the natural economy of the Americas, and their introduction into either economy can only be pernicious. As a result, Montesquieu recommends commercial practices and colonial establishments which demonstrate continuity and contiguity, rather than disruption and dislocation. Rather like Bourdieu, then, he asks for an historicisation of signs by arguing that the economy of exchanges must reflect an organic connection to the body politic and its history.

Jean Starobinski has stated that for Montesquieu 'le mieux théorique serait en réalité une erreur politique. Il est préférable alors de renoncer à l’absolu de la justice, pour sauvegarder l’ordre traditionnel, fût-il imparfait [...] malgré les dénégations de Montesquieu, un monde explicable est quelquefois à ces yeux un monde justifiable'. In his rejection of pure structural linguistics, Pierre Bourdieu echoes Starobinski's analysis of Montesquieu, and cites the erasure of historical by physical determinism in De l'esprit des lois as an example in which the absence of history marks the acceptance and implicit justification of the status quo. Bourdieu argues that the contestation of closed linguistic economies through the historicisation of signs constitutes the precondition for social change. However, when we consider more closely the textual economy of De l'esprit des lois, the link between an historicisation of signs and historical change does not seem to follow. Indeed, I would like to argue that the reverse appears to be true: the historicisation of signs, or the maintenance of an organic connection to the referent, appears to be linked to the perpetuation of colonies as of the self-contained sociopolitical economies of North and South, Orient and Occident. By contrast, it is possible to view Montesquieu's staging of colonial encounter around the phenomenon of an influx of foreign and non-referential signs as the place in which history is reintroduced into the textual economy.

This claim is predicated on a reading of De l'esprit des lois which approaches the textual economy of De l'esprit des lois as an attempt at organic unity, rather than as a genetic narrative. Although this reading is reflected in the foregoing, I would like to review briefly the primary senses in which the textual economy facilitates the construction of a series of socio-political economies, because critical attempts to 'save' Montesquieu from his own etiologic rhetoric frequently have recourse to the claim that he is, at the end of the day, an historian rather than a sociologist or anthropologist. There is no doubt that Montesquieu's work is that of an historian as well as a scholar of jurisprudence and of society or 'cultures'; however, I would argue that De l'esprit des lois' abundant references to history and to historical exceptions or anomalies are consistently subordinated to synchronic principles of organisation and to the elaboration of general laws. In this sense, Bourdieu is right to point to the fact that in De l'esprit des lois, Montesquieu takes on the Cartesian model and attempts to elaborate a science of historical facts, capable, like physics, of seizing the necessary relations of things.

Part I of De l'esprit des lois presents a taxonomy of forms of government, tied to specific conditions of climate, terrain and population. Each of the three forms of government - despotism, monarchy, republic - names a complex system or economy in which the type of government is linked to a 'principle' - virtue, honour or fear - and to a series of laws and social practices which

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36. Montesquieu par lui même, p.67. This passage follows the one cited above, p.8, in which Starobinski suggests that Montesquieu rarely condemning divisions of liberty simply from the perspective of justice or natural law. I would see the separation of moral and political spheres in De l'esprit des lois as being less stark, since Starobinski suggests, for as we have seen, practices that infringe upon liberty and justice often turn out to be precisely those which disrupt the political status quo.

37. This is the argument of the introductory chapter of Ce que parler veut dire, 'L'économie des échanges linguistiques'.

38. Ce que parler veut dire, p.240-41. In 1934, Montesquieu wrote an essay recommending the study of science, with the decidedly Cartesian title Discours sur les mathématiques qui sont devenus une science. Cf. also Althusser's discussion of Montesquieu, La politique et l’histoire (Paris 1970), p.10, of the anti-empirical strain in the method of De l’esprit des lois, whose chapters often proceed in Cartesian fashion with the elaboration of a rule or principle followed by the production of examples to justify it. I thank Anthony Stringfield for pointing out this reference.
perpetuate it. The concern over the 'preservation' of the body politic which we have also encountered in Rousseau, and which, as we have seen, reflects an organicist principle of survival, extends to these individual forms of government, which appear to strive to replicate themselves. Indeed, I would argue that Montesquieu's theory of the etiology and function of specific laws within the state can only be understood from the precept that each system will attempt to preserve itself, and that the function of laws is to assure continuity. The sense that laws are there to assure the preservation of equilibrium is communicated as early as the first chapter of the first book, for in describing the laws that govern the physical universe, Montesquieu states that 'chaque diversité est uniforme, chaque changement est constance' (p.530). Although he subsequently states that 'il s'en faut bien que le monde intelligent soit aussi bien gouverné que le monde physique' (p.530), the view that laws assure continuity and equilibrium can frequently be seen to extend to the sphere of human societies. The most familiar illustration of this tendency occurs with Montesquieu's arguments in favour of the 'thir viz' noblesse', his repeated statements that monarchy can only be sustained by power-sharing with the nobility. In a monarchy, laws are supposed to support the 'principle' which sustains it: the code of honour which regulates the behaviour of the nobility more than that of any other social group. Thus Montesquieu states that the laws of a monarchy that 'il faut qu'elles y travaillent à soutenir c'est Noblesse' (p.549). Despotism, defined primarily as the absence of codified laws, is nevertheless said to be maintained by monos which perpetuate it: 'c'est une maxime capitale qu'il ne faut jamais changer les mœurs dans l'Etat despotique, rien ne serait plus promptement suivi d'une révolution' (p.643). Even when Montesquieu reflects on the ways in which one can alter the mœurs of a nation, change is said to be necessitated by the inappropriateness of laws or customs in a particular climate. Writing of a change in laws under Peter the Great, Montesquieu states that 'Ce qui rendait le changement plus aisée, c'est que les mœurs d'alors étaient étrangères au climat'.

I would now like to return to the question of the irruption of history into a textual economy which represents North and South, Orient and Occident, in terms of closed economies, coherent and self-perpetuating socio-political systems in which climate, government and domestic arrangements are inextricably related. Whereas colonial encounter is often represented in eighteenth-century political theory as an encounter between history (on the side of Europe) and nature (the New World), Montesquieu's narrative can be read as one of Europe's fall into history, to the extent that the meeting with an other is shown to disrupt the self-reproducing circularity of the metropolitan economy. The closed economies of North and South, Orient and Occident, monarchy and despotism, appear to be opened up in the moment of encounter which precedes the emergence of cultural differences. Montesquieu's discussion of the influx of foreign signs into the Spanish economy is emblematic of this process, because it illustrates the destabilisation incurred by the encounter between two distinct economies and their signifying systems.

This representation of intercultural encounter is a feature not just of *De l'esprit des lois*, but also of the *Lettres persanes*, in which the meeting of Persia and France provides the impetus for a reciprocal defamiliarisation of naturalised signs, and, as a result, an interrogation of their privileged status. This process is rendered most visible in the periphrastic approaches to French institutions and codes of behaviour - monarchy, religious ritual, the Académie française - which abound in this text. The fall into history of the harem-master, Usbek, can be seen to result from his unwillingness to apply the techniques for reading signs which he has learned on his travels in France - in other words, for interrogating their naturalised relation to a referent - to his own domestic arrangements.

In the narrative of *De l'esprit des lois*, New World gold and silver, signs which have no organic connection either to nature or to genetic history, are shown to disrupt the continuity and organic coherence of the Spanish economy by opening up a gap between signifier and signified, bringing economic ruin, and with it interrogation of a naturalised and unquestioned system of reference. In this sense it is ironically the formal system, the set of free-floating and ahistorical signs, which opens the continuum of closed economy into genuine history - the arbitrary and unpredictable linkage of signifiers with signified which constitutes historical change beyond either the reproduction of the same or the assimilation of difference within a global economy.

Needless to say, this reflection on the paradoxical historicity of a pure signifying system concerns the textual economy of *De l'esprit des lois*, or the

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39. This is the well-known passage in which Montesquieu announces that 'l'Empire du climat est le premier de tous les empires' (p.643). The decomposition or decline of a despotism presents particular theoretical problems within the text, which essentially fails to show how a government which is constitutionally corrupt can in fact corrupt itself. Although there is some ambivalence on this question, we do occasionally find Montesquieu offering advice as to how such governments - though they appear to have consequences that are purely negative - can survive, and commenting on laws which proved disastrous to despotic states and on practices which, by contrast, helped to sustain them.

40. Of course, these economies enjoy great currency in eighteenth-century thought, although their coherence and opposition is rejected by some thinkers, notably by Voltaire in the *Essai sur les moeurs*, and by Aqaeul Du Perron in *Lettres orientales*.
way in which it represents history and social realities, rather than these realities themselves. It is certainly not my intention, for example, to advocate a return to structural anthropology or indeed structural linguistics, or to endorse their erasure of conditions of spectatorship and the power relations inherent to discourses in favour of a focus on the cultural analogues of unvarying linguistic structures. However, I do think that the surprising historicity of signs within the representative project of *De l'esprit des lois* suggests that we not dismiss outright the dynamic potential of the sign by subordinating it to a representation of extra-linguistic historical agency. Attention to signs and to linguistic structures is all too often dismissed as an apolitical and ahistorical mode of enquiry. Yet in reading *De l'esprit des lois* we encounter the possibility that a model which focuses on reference or on the organic continuity of words and things actually limits historical change by extending the boundaries of representation to become all-encompassing. By contrast, the collapse of the transparent representative relationship between signifier and signified which leads us to focus on the sign, or on the process of signification, opens up the question of reference and representation in a way that allows for history in the sense of Heidegger or of Foucault, as the disruption of continuity and of the reproduction of the status quo.

When, in the *Archéologie du savoir*, Foucault compares the methodology of what he terms 'archéologie' with various traditional paradigms of historical analysis and representation, he insists on the importance of discontinuity, and on the difficulty of capturing it in a theory:

comme si, là où on avait été habitué à chercher des origines, à remonter indéfiniment la ligne des ancêterances, à reconstituer des traditions, à suivre des courbes évolutives, à projeter des séquences, et à recourir sans cesse aux métaphores de la vie, on éprouverait une répugnance singulière à penser la différence, à décrire des écarts et des dispersions, à dissoudre la forme nascente de l'identité.

In this sense, our relationship to discontinuity is indeed, as Foucault states, a relationship with 'l’Autre', to the extent that the 'Other' is always a limit or a break, a category that we can scarcely represent without reducing it to the logic of the same which, in this case, is historical continuity. In fact, *L'Archéologie du savoir* marks something of a turning-point for Foucault, who acknowledges the dynamic forms of 'history of continuity' which, since Canguilhem, have emerged in the history of ideas. By raising questions about methodology — questions pertaining to levels of historical analysis, to the delimitation of wholes and sub-categories ('ensembles et sous-ensembles'), and to the kinds of relations to be examined (functional, causal, the relationship between signifier and signified) — this new history disrupts the monolithistic coherence of historical methodology. As a cultural historian, Montesquieu can perhaps be seen as one of the founders of an historical enterprise which values the study of continuity over the pre-Enlightenment elaboration of linear narratives celebrating wars and monarchs. When Foucault writes of the new history of continuity, evoking metaphors of life and the study of climate, demography and sociological constraints, we inevitably reflect on Montesquieu's contribution to the vast and ongoing project of social history as a history of continuity. His interrogation in the *Lettres persanes* of the role of signs, however, and of the impasses of transcultural reference, would seem to deviate from this model, by stressing discontinuity and change. In a similar way, the depiction of colonial encounter in *De l'esprit des lois* raises the question of the 'Other', not in the direct, political way suggested by Diana Schaub, but by focusing on the question of signs, and thereby creating a point of disruption in the historical representation of continuity.

43. L'Archéologie du savoir, p.20-21. To summarise: whereas the preface to Les Mots et les choses stresses discontinuity in contradistinction to the 'continuity' constructed by the history of ideas, the introduction to *L'Archéologie du savoir* attributes a more positive status to the history of ideas and of science because of their capacity to elaborate a variety of methodological and temporal paradigms.

44. L'Archéologie du savoir, p.21.


41. Indeed, it has recently been argued that the Spanish economy was not ruined by its colonial enterprises.