

POSC 350: MONTESQUIEU

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Winter 2013
Office Hours: Fri. 11-1 and 2-4
and by appointment

I. Purpose and Scope

Charles-Louis de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, was one of the great founders of modern liberalism. Writing in the 18th Century, Montesquieu was not among those who laid liberalism's original foundations. That work had been done in earlier generations by thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke, and Spinoza. Yet Montesquieu's work was distinguished by two signal characteristics, and it commends itself to us for just these reasons.

First, whereas his predecessors articulated doctrines of natural rights that would serve as the philosophic foundations of the first modern liberal regimes—see, for example, the American Declaration of Independence—Montesquieu was an important influence on liberal *constitutionalism*: he taught the principles by which a liberal regime could be successfully governed and sustained.

Yet Montesquieu's importance to us goes well beyond and much deeper than the mechanics of governance. Students of modern political thought will know that the natural rights doctrines of the early liberal theorists have been under serious assault—and historically speaking, *successful* assault—for more than two centuries now. The self-evident truths so confidently propounded in 1776 no longer find such robust expression in an era in which truth is regarded as relative if its existence is even conceded at all. It is here that Montesquieu's second great contribution comes to sight. Montesquieu's understanding and embrace of liberalism are not based on a natural rights doctrine or indeed any discernible doctrine. Rather, Montesquieu grounds his teaching in a wide-ranging investigation of alternatives (including ancient and Eastern alternatives) and in an exhaustive investigation of human nature. He asks, in effect, what we are and what ways of life and what forms of governance would best suit us. This feature of his thought not only exempts him from the critique of more doctrinal versions of liberalism, it also provides us with an opportunity to consider anew what liberalism is, what it might yet be, and how it—and *we*—might be sustained and ennobled.

In this course we will devote ourselves to close study of Montesquieu's final and most comprehensive book, *The Spirit of the Laws*.

II. Course Requirements and Grading

By far the most important requirement is that you read all assigned passages **closely** and **before class**.

You will be asked to present a short paper (5 to 7 pages) on a selected portion of the text (chosen by the instructor in accordance with your preferences, if possible) and to lead class discussion for a portion of that day's meeting. The short paper will count for 25% of your grade.

A twenty-page seminar paper will count for 50% of your grade. The seminar paper will be due on Saturday, March 16. Paper topics must be approved by the instructor by Friday, March 1 (preferably sooner).

The remaining 25% of your grade will be based on class participation (including your class presentation): since this is a seminar, your active and sustained participation is expected.

III. Reading

The only required text for this course is *The Spirit of the Laws*. Please be sure to purchase the translation by Cohler, Miller, and Stone (Cambridge University Press), which is available at the bookstore.

The Spirit of the Laws is a long and demanding book, and you are not required to read anything else. For those interested, however, I have requested that the following books be placed on closed (i.e., two-hour) reserve at the Library:

- David W. Carrithers, Michael A. Mosher, and Paul A. Rahe, eds., *Montesquieu's Science of Politics: Essays on the "Spirit of the Laws"* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001).
- Anne M. Cohler, *Montesquieu's Comparative Politics and the Spirit of American Constitutionalism* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 1988).
- Sharon R. Krause, *Liberalism with Honor* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).
- Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, trans. Rebecca Balinski (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).
- Thomas L. Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism: A Commentary on the "Spirit of the Laws"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).
- Thomas L. Pangle, *The Theological Basis of Liberal Modernity in Montesquieu's "Spirit of the Laws"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
- Paul A. Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty: War, Religion, Commerce, Climate, Terrain, Technology, Uneasiness of Mind, the Spirit of Political Vigilance, and the Foundations of the Modern Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) [not yet available].
- Robert Shackleton, *Montesquieu: A Critical Biography* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1961).
- Judith N. Shklar, *Montesquieu*, Past Masters Series, (Oxford; New York : Oxford

University Press, 1987).

IV. Class Schedule

Please note that the reading assignments vary in length: be sure to give yourself enough time to complete them. Also note that this is an *approximate* schedule. We may depart from it if class discussions, etc. so require.

January 3: Author's Foreword, Preface, Book 1

January 8: Books 1-2

January 10: Books 3-4

January 15: Book 5

January 17: Books 6-8

January 22: Books 9-10

January 24: Book 11

January 29: Books 12-13

January 31: Books 14-15

February 5: Books 16-17

February 7: Book 18

February 12: Book 19

February 14: Book 20

February 19: Book 21

February 21: Book 22

February 26: Book 23

February 28: Books 24-25

March 5: Books 26 and 29

March 7: Conclusion