

Comment on Montesquieu's *Posthumous works*. Milano: Bompiani, 2017, 2668 pp.

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At first glance a work focused on *Posthumous works* of Montesquieu might seem to be an old fashioned pursuit. Philosophy has come widely under attack from various viewpoints, throughout the world. Moreover, this dominant perspective seems to become always more natural for one part of the population in some countries. For instance, we think about the statements of the president of Brazil Jair Bolsonaro and his policy of cuts in the funding for universities¹; we have in mind the articles of the financial journalist Stefano Feltri whereby Philosophy would be useless² or certain declarations of the Italian Minister of Interior Matteo Salvini³. In 2015, the Minister Hakuban Shimomura encouraged an anti-humanistic policy in Japan⁴. Fortunately, there are also exceptions like the president of Ireland Michael D. Higgins who recently drew attention to the importance of Philosophy⁵.

After all, politics concerns also the effort to affect the actions of people through the control of the meaning of the words they use. A political power survives until it will be able to maintain the monopoly on the ways in which people elaborate their experience. The aim of every election campaign is that of trying to provide brain patterns with which people translate their experiences into thoughts that orient their social conduct to the advantage of the subjects who paid for the marketing campaign. In this regard, a certain type of Philosophy can be a dangerous enemy for this type of biopolitical despotism.

¹ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/sociology-and-philosophy-under-threat-in-brazil-a-petition/>

² <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2015/08/13/il-conto-salato-degli-studi-umanistici/1954676/>

³ https://www.ilmattino.it/primopiano/politica/nomine_parlamento_europeo_italia-4519417.html and https://www.corriere.it/scuola/universita/18_settembre_13/no-numero-chiuso-medicina-si-lettere-che-ha-troppi-laureati-parola-fuoricorso-salvini-b0681b56-b72e-11e8-9561-cd36d3b96a7c.shtml

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2015/sep/25/japans-humanities-chop-sends-shivers-down-academic-spines>

⁵ <https://bigthink.com/personal-growth/young-philosophers?rebellitem=1#rebellitem1>

Gramsci gave us a concept to frame this question: hegemony. Adorno and Horkheimer described some of the new tools of the modern society in order to strengthen the consensus: for example, the cultural industry. We know from Karl Marx that what seems natural is the fruit of history; we know from George Berkeley that abstracts ideas don't exist: there are particular ideas behind. In this sense, we think there is another philosopher that could be very useful in the context where we live.

The first critical edition of *Posthumous works* of Montesquieu edited by Domenico Felice was released in Italy in November 2017, three years after the publication of Montesquieu's *Complete works* (1721-1754). The book, French facing text, is entitled *Scritti postumi (1757-2006). I miei pensieri. I miei viaggi. Saggi. Romanzi filosofici. Memorie e discorsi accademici. Poesie*. It was posted by the Florence/Milan-based publishing house Giunti-Bompiani and it forms the second part of a collection that will end with a volume including some other writings of Montesquieu.

In particular, the third book will contain: 1) two important *recueils* like *Spicilège* and the *Geographica II*; 2) *Historia romana* (there is not certainty that this work in Latin was written by Montesquieu) and the *Correspondence*; 3) the *textes d'attribution incertaine: Pour Madame Le Franc* (written in 1738, published in 1914), *Pour Madame Geoffrin* (1738, published in 1955) and the *Essai touchant les lois naturelles et la distinction du juste et de l'injuste* (about 1747, published in 1955) which Robert Shackleton established it cannot be attributable to Montesquieu⁶. The third volume will also include some private writings: the *Mémoire contre l'arrêt du Conseil du 27 février 1725*, the *Questions sur la culture de la vigne*, the *Compliment fait au roi à la tête de l'Académie française*, the *Souvenirs de la Cour de Stanislas Leckzinski*, the *Requête au roi contre l'arrêt du 26 juillet 1749 qui approuvait les projets de Tourny*, the *Testament*, the *Mémoire de ma vie* and *Au château de La Brède*.

The second volume contains most of the writings published after the death of Montesquieu, apart from *Projet d'une histoire de la Terre ancienne et modern*, *Discours de réception à l'Académie française*, *Mémoire sur le principe et la nature du mouvement* and the *Traité des devoirs*. These were known through *résumptions* o *comptesrendu*. After they had been read at the academy of Bordeaux, they were published on academic journals⁷.

The book covers the whole life of Montesquieu as author from the *Mémoire sur les dettes de l'État* (written in 1715 and published in 1892) to the *Essai sur le gout* (1753-1755 ca., published in 1757) and *Ébauche de l'éloge*

⁶ R. Shackleton, *L'«Essai touchant les lois naturelles» est-il de Montesquieu?*, in Id., *Essay on Montesquieu and on the Enlightenment*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1988, pp. 133-144.

⁷ D. Felice, *Nota editoriale*, in Montesquieu, *Scritti postumi (1757-2006). I miei pensieri. I miei viaggi. Saggi. Romanzi filosofici. Memorie e discorsi accademici. Poesie*, edited by D. Felice, Firenze-Milano, Giunti-Bompiani, 2017, p. VII.

historique du maréchal de Berwick (1753 ca., published in 1778), or *Mémoire sur le silence à imposer sur la Constitution* (1753). We deal with a great variety of writings marked by different length, worth and issue that shed light upon the complex structure of Montesquieu's thought: short poems and speeches like *À Dassier* and the *Discours de réception à l'Académie française*; recuiles like the *Pensées and the voyages*; moreover, we can find scientific and philosophical speeches like *Discours sur la cause de l'écho*, *Éloge de la sincérité* and *De la considération et de la réputation*. At the same time, we can read philosophical novels (*Arsace et Isménie*) and unfinished essays like *Essai sur les causes qui peuvent affecter les esprits et les caractères*.

Each work is accompanied by an editorial note with an introduction to the reading of the text. With the annotation we can find in the notes, this part provides a guideline for the comprehension of the texts in all its aspects. In addition, the volume counted on the cooperation of many scholars. For example, Piero Venturelli drafted the *Chronology of life and works*.

There are two significant meditations at the end of Felice's editorial note: 1) According to Felice, Montesquieu would have been an author often plagiarized without being mentioned. Not only by following philosophers like Kant but also by contemporary author like Jared Manson Diamond, the author of *Guns, Germs and steal. The fates of Human Societies* (1998)⁸. Felice offers many examples in this regard. For one, Diamond referred to the importance of the climate change as is typical in Montesquieu⁹. 2) The second meditation of Felice is about a consideration of Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) on Montesquieu. According to him, the words of Berlin would represent the core of Montesquieu's thought, not only concerning the *Lettres persanes*, the *Considérations sur les Romains* and the *Esprit des lois*, but also in connection with the *Posthumous works*.

For Berlin, Montesquieu is not a monist but a pluralist. Indeed, Montesquieu didn't mean to reduce everything to a unique moral or metaphysical principle. His theoretical strength remains that of communicating the sense of a different culture. He didn't judge the others societies in the light of the standards of his position. The substitution of general principles with the perception of individual differences is the worst thing could happen in the act of knowing for Montesquieu.

He tried to understand these differences underlying how the various ways of living were conditioned by the environment and the climate change, for instance. This capacity to sympathize with other cultures, recognising their capacity to satisfy human needs, would have been the basis of his tolerance. Berlin argued that Montesquieu comprehended that human beings have different and often

⁸ Ivi, p. X.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

incompatible purposes. These have produced not only struggles between two different civilizations or among people of the same civility, but also different ideals. Montesquieu understood that, given the variety of the situations and the complexity of every single case, it was not possible to find a single moral system, a single political goal that could provide an universal solution of all human problems everywhere, at any times¹⁰.

Berlin wrote:

“To seek to impose such single systems, no matter how worthy and noble and widely believed, must always in the end lead to persecution and deprivation of liberty. Despotism is ‘obvious, uniform throughout; passion alone is sufficient to establish it, and anyone can produce that’. Only those societies are truly free which are in a state of ‘agitation’, unstable equilibrium; whose members are free to pursue – choose between – a variety of ends or goals”¹¹.

On the same line, Rasmussen argued:

“In other words, instead of judging regimes and laws on the basis of a single principle or standard such as natural rights or utility or some human telos, Montesquieu draws on a number of partial or incomplete standards, such as how well they fulfill people’s basic desires; how well they promote security, liberty, and prosperity; how stable they are; and even which character traits they encourage in people”¹².

Montesquieu preferred peace to the conflict. Still Berlin: «He is suspicious of all new creeds since they are usually the work of zealots and lead to strife. But once a creed has found a degree of acceptance, then, however foolish, it should be tolerated and not persecuted out of existence; for it is more important that people should be free to err than that they be coerced into holding correct opinions. Montesquieu was not a relativist about the truth. In common with most enlightened men of his period he believed that the objective truth in all realms was discoverable. But he believed even more deeply that societies which did not grant freedom of choice between ideals, with due precautions against open warfare between their adherents, would inevitably decay and perish»¹³.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. XIV.

¹¹ I. Berlin, *Against the current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, edited by H. Hardy, introduction by R. Hausheer, foreword by M. Lilla, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2013, p. 200.

¹² D.C. Rasmussen, *The Pragmatic Enlightenment: Recovering the Liberalism of Hume, Smith, Montesquieu, and Voltaire*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 92.

¹³ I. Berlin, *Against the current*, cit., p. 200.

Indeed, Montesquieu was averse to each form of orthodoxy. He had «a point of view which, because it sets freedom above happiness, peace and virtue, is always suspect, always unpopular»¹⁴.

The method of Montesquieu was characterised by prudence and grip on reality because «timeless rules, rigidly imposed, will always end in blood»¹⁵. The real enemy of Montesquieu was certainly despotism.

It is useful report here what Felice underlines of Berlin's interpretation of Montesquieu. This in order to get the essence of Montesquieu's thought and to understand how the Italian editors interpreted Montesquieu:

“It is against the ‘terrible simplifiers’ of this type, whose intellectual lucidity and moral purity of heart seemed to make them all the readier to sacrifice mankind again and again in the name of vast abstractions upon altars served by imaginary sciences of human behaviour, that Montesquieu’s cautious empiricism, his distrust of laws of universal application, and his acute sense of the limits of human powers, stand up so well [...]. Human history is not susceptible to the simple laws which had so deeply hypnotised many noble thinkers, especially in France. ‘*La plupart des effets arrivent par des voies si singulieres, ou dependent de causes si imperceptibles et si eloignees qu’on ne peut guere les prévoir.*’ And since this is so, all we can do is to try to frustrate as few human beings as possible, whatever their purposes”¹⁶.

For Berlin, but also Felice shares this position:

“Despite his archaic classifications of political institutions, his a priori conceptions of the inner principles of social growth and of absolute justice as an eternal relationship in nature, Montesquieu emerges as a far purer empiricist both with regard to means and with regard to ends than Holbach or Helvetius or even Bentham, not to speak of Rousseau or Marx”¹⁷.

In this regard, also *De la politique* represents an accusation against politics intended as the presumption to reduce reality to a theoretical prejudice. The complexity at the basis of reality, due to the variety of his causes, is what really contributes to the creation of a general spirit. According to Montesquieu, there would be a particular spirit in each age of history, but we should place the emphasis on the general spirit that is common in all those differences if we

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 202.

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 203.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

want to obtain a real knowledge. Furthermore, for these reasons, in front of this historical and psychological complexity, prudence and moderation would be the most important values at the basis of a good political conduct.

Looking at the note to *Mes Pensées*, Felice compares Montesquieu to Montaigne for the common ability to understand the psychology of human beings. The curiosity of Montesquieu regards always what it is necessary for the progress of the whole humanity, how is also witnessed in *Mes Voyages*: here the concrete experience is more important than philosophical speculation. Other terms of comparison for Montesquieu are La Rochefoucauld concerning the disenchantment towards the *humana conditio*, La Bruyère with regard to the description of the variety of human beings and Vauvenargues for the love towards the virtue. Human nature is probably the central issue of Montesquieu's thought where economics, history, anthropology, ethnology etc. constitute the theoretical frame of reference.

In the volume under consideration, *Mes Pensées* are presented integrally for the first time in Italian. In these pages, we can find the topic of despotism, the most widespread political form for Montesquieu. In this regard, Felice underlies that Montesquieu meditated on oppression rather than freedom¹⁸. This evokes again the topic of the moderation, also in connection with happiness. How Felice wrote:

“Ma l'intera questione della felicità ha da essere necessariamente coniugata con quella della moderazione, vero e proprio fulcro del pensiero di Montesquieu: la felicità, a suo parere, va di conserva con la misura, vale a dire con desideri *sempre e comunque* razionali e ragionevoli. La moderazione si manifesta, in tal maniera, come il migliore impiego delle nostre forze, nonché come l'unico *modus vivendi* in accordo sostanziale con quell'attivismo 'pensato' e responsabile che il filosofo di La Brède considera connaturato alla condizione umana”¹⁹.

In conclusion, in this paper we have tried to highlight why Montesquieu could be much more useful than we are used to think. Clearly, using the term 'useful' with a polemical shade of meaning. In this regard, the *Posthumous works* of Montesquieu provide an important instrument in order to rethink our conception of the complexity of reality and the related political conduct. Only the prudence could provide the conditions to understand the reality without reducing his problematic nature to a theoretical prejudice. Also the prudence must characterize an action adherent to the nature of the complexity of a reality on which we have to impact in order to fight against every kind of despotisms.

¹⁸ D. Felice, *Nota al testo* [introduction to *Mes Pensées*], in Montesquieu, *Scritti postumi (1757-2006)*, cit., p. 1433.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.