

National Character and Public Spirit in Britain and France, 1750–1914

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1 All Montesquieu's sons: the place of *esprit général*, *caractère national*, and *mœurs* in French political philosophy, 1748–1789

1 Introduction

This chapter does not focus on the multifaceted meaning of terms so widely used as *mœurs*, *manières*, or even *caractère national*.¹ Nor does it consider all aspects of the relevant literature. Montesquieu is taken as lodestar, following the early criticism of the *Esprit des lois* (1748) as well as the easily recognizable traces that this work left in later writings. The choice of Montesquieu is unsurprising, considering that the interpreters of the French Enlightenment have traditionally seen his work as seminal in many respects. Yet we must be on our guard against assuming any innovation, watershed, or sharp break within the tradition of thought about national characters – Montesquieu's masterpiece is no exception. The *Esprit des lois* was a universal reference for following writers, but this was neither because of its author's views on the influence of climates, nor because of his views on the effectiveness of political factors. It was clearly the frame and not the picture that made the difference. Montesquieu had turned the relationship between government and people's attitudes into an element within a comprehensive vision of politics, and this accounts for the lasting impression that the book made on contemporaries.

The *Esprit des lois* may be considered as the beginning of a fruitful tension within French pre-revolutionary thought between the postulates of classical political theory and in particular of civic humanism – which centred on citizens' virtues as both cause and effect of good government – and some tentative

¹ As regards the working meaning of these terms: *mœurs* relate to internal convictions and *manières* to external behaviour, but an intimate connection was thought to exist between the two. See A. M. Wilson, 'The Concept of *mœurs* in Diderot's Social and Political Thought', in W. H. Barber et al., eds., *The Age of the Enlightenment: Studies Presented to Theodore Besterman* (Edinburgh, 1967), pp. 188–99, where *mœurs* are defined as 'the internalization of control' (p.194). For a definition of *caractère national*, see the anonymous entry 'Caractère des nations' in *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (17 vols., Paris, 1751–65), II, p. 666: 'Le caractère d'une nation consiste dans une certaine disposition habituelle de l'âme, qui est plus commune chez une nation que chez une autre, quoique cette disposition ne se rencontre pas dans tous les membres qui composent la nation.'

explorations into the study of society and its dynamics.² The sway of the *Esprit des lois* was so wide that it might be tempting to characterize these decades through a contrast between Montesquieu's concept of *esprit général* and *mœurs*, where the former was a manifestation of the new 'science' of comparative politics, and the latter amounted to the traditional complement to republican government. These two strands of thought can be distinguished only for the sake of argument, however, even in Montesquieu's case; and, while *mœurs* were not only a component of the civic humanist discourse but also a notion used to describe and represent French society, Montesquieu's *esprit général*, if it did point to the relationship between government and society, was constructed with classical material. Although a line of development towards a social focus is indeed traceable, the scene appears far from straightforward because new insights were usually grafted onto old ones. The legacy of the past was manifold, with at least the climatic argument to be placed alongside civic humanism, and was remarkably vital. At the same time, the traditional frames of reference happened to convey 'social' topics like public opinion or criticism of *salon* mores. Additionally, the *philosophes* were progressively devising perspectives which could be subsumed within neither *esprit général* nor the classical patterns of political discourse. All this determined a situation where political idioms blended and interacted.

To give a momentous instance of this mix of languages, it is indisputable that civic humanism lay at the basis of the widely held opinion that there was neither national character, nor *patrie*, nor public virtues when the country was oppressed by despotism, because general interests were neglected in favour of private pursuits. But the moral effects of tyranny came also to be viewed from another standpoint, and probably an equally popular one. From Montesquieu's picture of Asian rule onwards, 'despotism' as a form of government was inextricably linked to the demoralization of the subjects under it, a sort of lethargic apathy that effectively made people able to bear the regime but which proved ruinous when the qualities of citizenship had to be practised. The concept of despotism, which in Montesquieu had strong associations with natural causes like climate and geographical location, became a crucial reference throughout the French Enlightenment by virtue of the perception of a political degeneration following the age of Louis XIV. The civic humanist approach smoothly

² On the revival of the classical and especially Roman republican theory of citizenship in Renaissance Europe and after, see esp. Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1978), I; J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton, 1975); and, by the same author, *Virtue, Commerce and History* (Cambridge, 1987). On the wide currency of themes like corruption of morality, depopulation, the moral depravity of towns, the idealization of the countryside, and patriotism in eighteenth-century France, see H. Chisick, *The Limits of Reform in the Enlightenment: Attitudes toward the Education of the Lower Classes in Eighteenth-Century France* (Princeton, 1981), esp. pp. 190–244. On the admiration for Spartan virtue in France, see E. Rawson, *The Spartan Tradition in European Thought* (Oxford, 1969), pp. 220–300.

combined with Montesquieu's notion of despotism – and, more generally, with climatology. Both helped to substantiate a critique of the nation's mores which is a kind of hallmark of the period. On the one hand, the patriotism, frugality, and independence of republican citizens served as a standard, and on the other, there emerged a view of France as a 'mild' despotism, with all its moral implications. It will be documented how a few definite structures of discourse were mixed in various and original ways under the stimulus of discontent. The notion of national character played a role in all the perspectives that gradually emerged over the period of interest: apart, that is, from *esprit général*, philosophical history, radical naturalism in both Rousseau's and Diderot's versions, and the utilitarian approach.

The authors considered made extensive use of the adjective 'national', attaching it to the expressions they employed to define the moral condition of people. Yet this terminological practice did not entail an endorsement of the characteristically nineteenth-century idea of nations as singular polities, predetermined by unique language, shared beliefs, history, or destiny. Rather, it was the typology of forms of government inherited from antiquity that provided French writers with *prima facie* criteria for the appraisal of countries, including their own. The philosophers' 'nations' were usually the peoples inhabiting existing states, whereas states themselves were often regarded as necessary but strictly utilitarian political devices.³ Even state borders were often neglected in their assessments of collective manners and habits. Climate, for instance, when taken as a criterion for evaluating a people's character, was usually applied to vast areas of the globe (continents, for example) rather than to particular countries. The basic distinction within the climatological argument was more between North and South than between established states. That is not to say that there was an absence of patriotism in France – though I would point to its potentially universal rather than strictly French content.⁴ At any rate, since the question of whether a French national identity existed before 1789 is still far from resolution, it is appropriate to say that my view chiefly rests on the evidence supplied by the *philosophes*.⁵ Other sources may convey a different impression. One feature of 'nation', pointed out by some interpreters as one of its defining traits, namely, its original association with the process of enlargement of the political

³ See T. J. Schlereth, *The Cosmopolitan Ideal in Enlightenment Thought* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1977).

⁴ 'Typically, the "patriot" of eighteenth-century France was a man who had done something to promote the common good, such as, for example, writing a book on agriculture, or education, or ethics, or who had performed a signal act of beneficence.' Chisick, *The Limits of Reform*, p. 223.

⁵ See D. Bell, 'Recent Works on Early Modern French National Identity', *Journal of Modern History*, 68 (1996), pp. 84–113. Bell notes the often varying use in recent historical literature of terms like 'nation', 'nationalism', 'national identity', etc.; as these terms happen to mean different things to different historians, the subject has become 'nebulous' (pp. 86–8).

community to previously excluded sectors of the population, will serve as the thread of the chapter.

2 Montesquieu

‘Oh! Oh! Is he Persian? What a most extraordinary thing! How can one be a Persian?’, wondered Parisian persons of fashion.⁶ The whole of Montesquieu’s work can be regarded as a search for a reply to his contemporaries’ sardonic astonishment and open contempt. Concern about the *mœurs* of peoples lies at the base of his intellectual trajectory: first, in the *Lettres persanes*, French manners are the target of Montesquieu’s literary talent. Next, in the *Grandeur et décadence des Romains*, irony turns into a historical inquiry into the effects of virtue and vice. Finally, the *Esprit des lois* traces the operation of the natural laws that rule the moral world. Besides these milestones, *Mes pensées* and Montesquieu’s other unpublished papers further document his intellectual evolution from the literature of mores to what, in comparative and relative terms, can be called its science.

What Montesquieu depicts in the *Lettres persanes* (as well as in his other writings) as the French character is, in effect, that of the upper classes only, something which is obvious enough considering that ‘the mass of the population are an animal which can see and hear, but never thinks’.⁷ Consequently, no traits could be exclusive to the French populace in comparison with their counterparts in other countries. As was customary at the time, discussing the moral attitudes of the leisured class meant both dealing with what was peculiarly French and taking into account the whole *nation*, the *société* itself.

Montesquieu’s prime concern was the moral and political condition of France – the two facets could hardly be taken in isolation. The core of contemporary French character was a blend of honour and ‘gaieté’; but the former showed itself in the practice of duelling, and the latter in an outrageous habit of intemperate ‘jest [*badinage*]’.⁸ Sound values (that is, family ones) were neglected in favour of the arts of appearance and vain pleasures: the lifestyle of courtiers had become a model for all. ‘That unfortunate vivacity of our nation’, Montesquieu erupted, ‘which lets fashion affect even financial projects, the decisions of councils, and the government of provinces!’ Fashion rules the country unopposed – ‘it is the standard by which they judge everything that happens in other countries: they always think that anything foreign is ridiculous’. Yet this applies only to ‘bagatelles’, for French politics is managed in accordance with foreign laws and principles (he had in mind Roman law and Popish ultimatums).

⁶ *LP*, XXX, p. 83 (*Persian Letters*, trans. C. J. Betts (Harmondsworth, 1977), p. 83).

⁷ *LP*, CXI (variant reading, 2nd edn, 1721), p. 441.

⁸ *LP*, XC, pp. 215–16, and LXIII, p. 163.

Turned into a people of post-seekers, the new deity of the French is ‘influence [*la faveur*]’, whose priests are the ministers.⁹ Montesquieu’s portrait of France is that of a country where virtue is mocked, where witty but empty ‘gens du bel-air’ triumph in the *salons*, and political intriguers dictate state policies from the halls of the powerful.

Besides the ethical motifs which are inherent to the natural law philosophy, Montesquieu’s moral roots are firmly planted in classical models, in a nostalgic regret of the moral side of republican civic humanism. Classical examples provided him with the terms of comparison he needed in order to deal with ‘disorder’ in French manners. Conscious as he was that republican government was unthinkable in modern times, the relationship between freedom and virtue, on the one hand, and despotism and vice, on the other, was nonetheless a cornerstone of his thought – the whole of *Romains* may be regarded as *Lettres persanes* turned upside down, with the Romans’ virtues as the counterpart of French vices. D’Alembert shrewdly observed that Montesquieu ‘had made himself foreign to his own country’ in order to make a better assessment of its moral life.¹⁰

In the process of transition from *Lettres persanes* to *Esprit des lois*, a notable shift of emphasis occurred in the account of the causes of national character. This holds true even if signs of Montesquieu’s later beliefs can be found in both the *Lettres* and the *Romains*. The explanation put forward in *Lettres persanes* to account for the corrupted French *caractère général* was a political one. The latest vicissitudes of French character appear as a logical consequence of Louis XIV’s absolutist regime, as well as of the great power and riches of Catholic priests. Two further minor factors were avarice and, ultimately, the social mobility brought about by the failure of Law’s experiment and the insufficient degree of paternal authority allowed by French laws.¹¹

To the extent that royal power increased, the aristocracy abandoned its estates. This was the principal cause of the change in *mœurs* which occurred in the nation. The simple *mœurs* of former times were rejected in favour of the vanities of towns; women stopped knitting [*quittèrent la laine*] and began to despise all amusements which were not pleasures.¹²

Within this political and social process, the bad moral examples set by kings and ministers played a salient part: ‘the sovereign imposes his attitudes on the

⁹ ‘Mes pensées’, *OC*, I, p. 1337; *LP*, C, pp. 232–3 (*Persian Letters*, pp. 184–5; trans. modified), and LXXXVIII, p. 213.

¹⁰ D’Alembert, ‘Eloge de M. le président de Montesquieu’ (1755), in *EDL*, p. 77.

¹¹ *LP*, XCII, p. 218; XCIV, p. 221; for religion, see CXVI–CXVII, pp. 262–7; Law’s influence is dealt with in CXXXVIII, pp. 306ff., CXLII, pp. 321ff., CXLVI, pp. 335–7; and paternal authority in CXXIX, pp. 287–8.

¹² ‘Mes pensées’, p. 1146.

court, the court on the town, and the town on the provinces'.¹³ The growing influence of women acted as both cause and effect of moral crisis, whereas luxury figures as a powerful agent of corruption only in *Grandeur et décadence des Romains*. A contrast between England and France is sketched. After asserting that 'not all nations of Europe are equally submissive to their rulers', Montesquieu maintained that 'the restive disposition of the English hardly give their king the time to assert his authority'. If the main feature of French character was its inconsistency, the English were certainly greedy but also hardheaded and self-reliant. Montesquieu always commended the manly qualities of the English, but he regarded the feverish spirit that had made them free as the cause of perpetual unrest and anxiety and, consequently, unhappiness.¹⁴

Montesquieu's later account of *esprit général* was based on the revelation on the part of the philosopher of the concealed action of natural laws, culminating in his rediscovery of the influence of climate over men's attitudes. Therefore, in *Esprit des lois*, the political factor may, and sometimes does, appear to be a trifling one that can be neglected without inconvenience. The will of kings has regularly proved impotent in the face of given 'things' and 'situations' as well as collective dispositions and interests.¹⁵ Yet nature and politics interact in Montesquieu's perspective, and this makes any sharp distinction between them out of place, as demonstrated by the persistence of political polemics within the natural law framework.¹⁶

In both his early books, Montesquieu had asserted the existence of 'immutable, eternal, and general laws'; from the writing known as 'De la politique' (1725) onwards, there is a recurrence in his writings of remarks of a deterministic kind about the effectiveness of the 'common character' of societies, that is, a sort of collective soul 'which is the effect of an infinite chain of causes, which multiply and combine over the centuries'.¹⁷ The term *esprit général* itself is used

¹³ See *LP*, XCIX, pp. 231–2 (*Persian Letters*, p. 184; trans. modified); CXLVI, pp. 335–7; see also the following texts by Montesquieu: *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence*, ed. J. Ehrard (1734; Paris, 1968), ch. 21, p. 167; 'Lettres de Xénocrate à Phérès' (1723–4), *OC*, I, pp. 517–18; 'Mes pensées', p. 1327 ('J'appelle génie d'une nation les mœurs et le caractère d'esprit de différents peuples dirigés par l'influence d'une même cour et d'une même capitale').

¹⁴ *LP*, CIV, p. 239 (*Persian Letters*, p. 190). On English character see *LP*, CIV, pp. 239–40; CXVII, p. 266; CXXXVI, p. 303; 'De la politique' (1725), *OC*, I, p. 114–15; 'Notes sur l'Angleterre', *OC*, I, pp. 876–7, 878, 883; 'Mes pensées', pp. 1334–7. On Spanish and Portuguese character see *LP*, LXXVIII, pp. 194–7; 'Essai sur les causes qui peuvent affecter les esprits et les caractères' (1732–6?), *OC*, II, pp. 59–60. Dutch character is dealt with in 'Voyage de Gratz à la Haye', *OC*, I, pp. 863–4, 869.

¹⁵ As instances of earlier remarks about the limited effectiveness of politics, see 'Analyse du Traité des devoirs' (1725), *OC*, I, pp. 108–11, and 'De la politique', pp. 112–19.

¹⁶ See Jean Ehrard's interpretation of Montesquieu in his *L'idée de la nature en France dans la première moitié du XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1963), and also M. Richter, *The Political Theory of Montesquieu* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 1–110.

¹⁷ The first quotation is from *LP*, XCVII, p. 227 (and see also *Grandeur des Romains*, ch. 18, p. 145, and 'Mes pensées', p. 1129); the second is from 'De la politique', p. 114 (and see also 'Réflexions sur les habitants de Rome' (1732), *OC*, I, pp. 910–12).

in *Romains* in order to account for the Romans' rise and fall: 'several examples accepted in the nation formed its *esprit général* and created its *mœurs*, which rule as imperiously as laws'.¹⁸ A pivotal theme of the *Esprit des lois*, oriental tyranny, with effeminacy as its concomitant, was commonplace for the readers of *Lettres persanes* and *Romains*. Neither were they neglectful of the two reasons for which French monarchy differed from oriental despotism: first, in France manners and religion still hindered the absolute will of kings, and, second, punishment was in proportion to crime, where the latter feature 'is as it were the soul of a state'.¹⁹

Another element had to be added in order to make up the *Esprit des lois*. This was the power of climate over men's character, a point made several times since Aristotle and which, since the sixteenth century, had been through several attempts at secularizing, generalizing, and systematizing.²⁰ Montesquieu mentions the effects of climate in many pre-1748 writings, but the theme is only given full treatment in his 'Essai sur les causes qui peuvent affecter les esprits et les caractères'.²¹ This unpublished text is divided into two parts dealing with the influence on character of physical and moral factors respectively. The former applies best, he says, to homogeneous groups of people like nations. He ascribes 'the different force of passions' to the 'different constitution of the body [*la machine*]', as it is through this that air temperature and 'thinness [*subtilité*]', nourishment, soil, and wind 'infinitely contribute to altering the spirit'. Physical impressions are transmitted to the soul by means of 'nervous fibres': the thicker and harder they are, the less sensitive one is. Notwithstanding the tributes he paid to observational sciences, in practice Montesquieu still adhered to Cartesian views and methods – this means that his physiology appears purely fictional to modern eyes.²² The following example of Montesquieu's way of reasoning is by no means an isolated one:

It is not well known what arrangement of the brain is required for a lively spirit, but one can speculate about it. For instance, it is known that the vivacity of the eye is often a

¹⁸ *Grandeur des Romains*, ch. 21, p. 167; see also ch. 15, pp. 116–17ff.

¹⁹ *LP*, CII, pp. 235ff.

²⁰ See J. Dedieu, *Montesquieu et la tradition politique anglaise en France* (Paris, 1909), esp. pp. 192–225; R. Mercier, 'La théorie des climats des *Réflexions critiques* à *L'esprit des lois*', *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 53 (1953), pp. 17–37, 159–74; R. Shackleton, 'The Evolution of Montesquieu's Theory of Climate', *Revue internationale de philosophie*, 9 (1955), pp. 317–29; R. Shackleton, *Montesquieu: a Critical Biography* (Oxford, 1963), pp. 303–19; Ehrard, *L'idée de la nature*, pp. 691–717; C. J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley, 1976), pp. 427–60, 551–65; G. Abbatisa, 'Teoria dei climi e immagine del Nord in Montesquieu', *Antologia Viessesu*, 19 (1983), pp. 13–23; C. Borghero, 'Dal "génie" all' "esprit": fisico e morale nelle *Considérations sur les Romains* di Montesquieu', in A. Postigliola, ed., *Storia e ragione* (Naples, 1987), pp. 251–76.

²¹ See *LP*, XXVI, p. 94; XXXIII, p. 108; XLVIII, p. 130; CXVIII, p. 268; CXXI, p. 271; CXXXVII, p. 304; and *Grandeur des Romains*, ch. 5, p. 54; ch. 20, p. 157.

²² See M. H. Waddicor, *Montesquieu and the Philosophy of Natural Law* (The Hague, 1970), pp. 22–9; Borghero, 'Dal "génie" all' "esprit"', pp. 255–7; a different interpretation is offered by S. Goyard-Fabre, *Montesquieu: la Nature, les Lois, la Liberté* (Paris, 1993), pp. 55ff.

sign of that of the mind. Now, peoples from cold climates seldom have animated eyes. As there is humidity in excess in their brains, the transmitting nerves are constantly wet, and therefore become loose; it follows that they are incapable of producing the swift and sharp vibrations which make eyes bright.²³

The main outcome of Montesquieu's physiology is the typology of national characters drawn along the North–South axis which has been rendered famous by *Esprit des lois*. But it is undeniable that, in all his texts, moral causes go hand in hand with the physical ones.²⁴ In the paper in question, the *caractère général* that he recognizes in each nation amounts to the effects of both climate and a combination of moral causes such as laws, religion, manners, habits, and the example of the court. 'The complexity of the causes that shape the *caractère général* of a people is great indeed.' He goes on to maintain that moral influences usually prevail over the force of climate.²⁵

The 'Essai sur les causes' is a preface to the full treatment of national character given in the *Esprit des lois*. This is a well-known passage:

Many things govern men: climate, religion, laws, the maxims of the government, examples of past things, mores [*mœurs*], and manners [*manières*]; a general spirit [*esprit général*] is formed as a result. To the extent that, in each nation, one of these causes acts more forcefully, the others yield to it. Nature and climate almost alone dominate savages; manners govern the Chinese; laws tyrannize Japan; in former times mores set the tone in Lacedaemonia; in Rome it was set by the maxims of government and the ancient mores.²⁶

Besides assertions like this, there are also statements which emphasise the predominant role played by climate. That national character is, nevertheless, the product of a blend of various causes is ultimately demonstrated by the comprehensive, flexible way in which Montesquieu constructs his arguments.²⁷ As a rule, he maintains that the more people's dispositions are harmed by the climate, the stricter the laws must be. The task of a wise legislator is to counterbalance or favour the social outcome of climate: 'if it is true that the character of the spirit and the passion of the heart are extremely different in the various climates, laws should be relative to the differences in these passions and to the differences in these characters'.²⁸ Climate is a major example of the 'nature des choses' which

²³ 'Essai sur les causes', p. 43.

²⁴ The twofold approach is applied in various contexts; see, e.g., 'Mes pensées', pp. 1015, 1303; 'Essai sur le goût dans les choses de la nature et de l'art' (1753–7), *OC*, I, pp. 1240–3.

²⁵ 'Essai sur les causes', pp. 58–9, 60–2. Among moral causes he also lists the influence of the people one lives with (p. 62) and that of one's profession (pp. 64–5).

²⁶ *EDL*, bk XIX, ch. 4, p. 461 (*The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. A. M. Cohler, B. C. Miller, and H. S. Stone (Cambridge, 1989), p. 310).

²⁷ While book XVI relates the condition of women to climate, book VII shows its connections with political principles; the whole of book IV explains the inner relationship that links education to forms of government; and the spirit of commerce has no relation whatsoever with climate (book XX).

²⁸ *EDL*, bk XIV, ch. 1, p. 373 (*The Spirit of the Laws*, p. 231); but see the whole bk XIV, pp. 373–88.

legislators have to take into full account. The relationship between climate and laws exemplifies the kind of regularity that appeared to many contemporaries as the essence of the new form of social and political knowledge. Climate, existing mores, religion, and established laws and principles of government make up the *esprit général*, which is the true basis for legislation. Whatever the form of government, rulers should avoid interfering with *esprit général* and, when forced to do so, should act slowly and with the utmost care. 'The government most in conformity with nature is the one whose particular arrangement best relates to the disposition of the people for whom it is established.'²⁹

Montesquieu was offering a lesson in moderation and prowess in legislative engineering founded on the discoveries of philosophers. The anti-absolutist implications of a position like this were unmistakable at the time, but to understand them now, in their full historical significance, it is pertinent to refer to the gradual process of legal and political separation between state and society. As documented by Tocqueville, 'society' as the private sphere of individual action progressively emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century as a result of the policies pursued by the Bourbon monarchs, which made the French state occupy the public sphere with a monopoly of the powers of legislation, police, warfare, justice, taxation, and administration.³⁰ Montesquieu, who was elaborating a philosophical reply to the loss of French aristocratic power as a result of absolute rule, was fighting a battle deeply conservative in nature. He strongly opposed the trend just mentioned through the advocacy of intermediary powers as constituting the true nature of monarchical government – in this sense he can be represented as an ideologist of the *noblesse de robe*.³¹

While many philosophers borrowed crucial ideas from Montesquieu, none of them took up the socio-political stance whose support those ideas had been intended for, and many turned them against that stance. The fortunes of the *noblesse* were, unquestionably, not a matter of concern for Voltaire, Rousseau or Diderot. A generation after Montesquieu French philosophers were engaged in the intellectual process of separating society from political structures and organization. The consideration of civil society meant something

²⁹ *EDL*, bk I, ch. 3, p. 128 (*The Spirit of the Laws*, p. 8). As regards *forms* of government, Montesquieu maintains, for instance, that civic virtue is required in republics, while fear is required under despotic rule – connections like these being treated as laws of nature. The form of government is clearly one of the moral factors that contribute to the shaping of *esprit général*. In books IV, V, and VII, he establishes a link between the three forms of government and types of education, laws, and luxury respectively. But the mould in which peoples are cast by forms of government amounts to a sort of ideal type. The fact that, for instance, frugality is required in republics merely shows one of the conditions of existence of republics according to the nature of things, whereas national character is effectively shaped within the much larger horizon of *esprit général*.

³⁰ A. de Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* (1856), *TOPC*, II.

³¹ See, e.g., M. Cranston, *Philosophers and Pamphleteers: Political Theorists of the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 30–3.

more than the appreciation of its inner dynamics, and the identification of its agents: in the face of a government monopolizing and centralizing power, and one which most philosophers came to oppose, society became the seat of healthy energies almost by default. Namely, it is arguable that this appreciation did not rest on a view of the virtues of the French middle ranks, as one might expect, but rather on the English example of political courage and entrepreneurial spirit. Whatever its source, a new perspective slowly took over, which increasingly saw society as the proper starting point of any political inquiry. Once divested of their aristocratic overtones, Montesquieu's arguments were such that, in the following decades, they would contribute to the emergence of the new standpoint. In particular, the origin of the relentless polemics that philosophers on both sides of the Channel waged against the *homme à systèmes*, that is, the thinker or politician who aimed to apply abstract schemes to the living bodies of societies, lies in the *Esprit des lois*. The debate assumed various overtones according to circumstances and the group against which it was directed, with the Physiocrats providing a regular target. There was, nevertheless, a general assumption underlying the philosophers' stance that even kings should respect the basic structures on which the life of a community depends. The intellectual emergence of civil society in France resulted from a steadily growing aversion to government policies; the only possible bulwark against these policies was the identification with social interests.

Montesquieu's famous distinction between the peoples of the North and the peoples of the South is that, in short, cold climates make men self-confident, brave, and persevering, whereas warm ones have an enervating and morally debasing effect.³² On Montesquieu's stage the chief players are the Asian peoples, the English, and the slaves. All were traditional objects of climatological reflections, and his treatment adds nothing new. In the case of the Asians, Chardin's *Voyage en la Perse* and Du Bos's *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*, among other works, had spread a belief in their climate-induced effete-ness and softness. For Montesquieu, hot climates made the Asians physically weak but imaginative, and 'a certain laziness of the spirit, naturally bound with that of the body' resulted. For this reason, and because of sharp contrasts in climate and hence character between neighbouring nations, which facilitated invasions, Asia was condemned to eternal despotism. Europe, on the other hand, thanks to a milder climate, developed a 'spirit of liberty'.³³ However, despotism was not in principle limited to hot countries. Despotism was one of the three types of government he envisaged (the others being the republican and the

³² *EDL*, bk XIV, pp. 373–88; compare Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. J. Barnes (Cambridge, 1995), 1327b20–38.

³³ *EDL*, bk XIV, ch. 4, p. 378; bk XVII, chs. 1–6, pp. 425–31. For the chorography of Asia and Europe in relation to the size of nations, see bk XVII, ch. 6, pp. 430–1.

monarchical). Actuated by fear, despotism presupposed education of a peculiar kind: the subject had to be ignorant and broken in spirit.³⁴

While substantially confirming the analysis of the English character already sketched, in the *Esprit des lois* Montesquieu not only adds that they have a tendency to commit suicide because of ‘a failure in the filtering of the nervous juice’, but also provides a number of insights into the influence that English laws can have on national mores and character. The essence of his argument, which takes up a long chapter in book XIX, is that citizens’ passions – from envy to ambition and political fervour – can be freely expressed under English government; the ultimate result of the social mobility thus prompted is a universal love of the country. Granted that the rise of the middling ranks brings the nation great riches, Montesquieu notes that the English show ‘a substantive luxury [*un luxe solide*]’ based on real needs as well as a certain spiritual ‘grossièreté’. He remarks that Englishmen are too involved in politics to live with women, so that the latter are ‘modest’ and ‘timid’.³⁵

In dealing with slavery Montesquieu is led to a sort of justification by his philosophical eagerness to apply natural laws to everything. This happens partly on climatological grounds:

there are countries where the heat enervates the body and weakens the courage so much that men come to perform an arduous duty only from fear of chastisement. . . . But, as all men are born equal, one must say that slavery is against nature, although in certain countries it may be founded on a natural reason.³⁶

Montesquieu made much use of an assumption which would become a recurrent motif of later discourses about national character: it could be called the ‘no pain, no gain’ argument. Mild climate and fertile soil, associated as they are with the easy satisfaction of needs, make peoples idle, and careless of the stimuli brought about by freedom. By contrast, those placed in a harsh environment are compelled to work hard and to reap freedom’s economic advantages. The expected vices and virtues result. Montesquieu applies this theory to Europe as a corollary of the North–South divide.³⁷ Even if disguised in climatological clothing, the moral implications of the ‘no pain, no gain’ argument seem obvious.

The rest of the chapter will explore the ways in which *esprit général* themes, in conjunction with the new centrality of the concept of despotism, served as the essential point of departure for younger writers, who recognized the suggestion of civil society latent in the *Esprit des lois*. Montesquieu’s significant innovation was the depiction of politics as structures where forms of government were

³⁴ *EDL*, bk IV, ch. 3, pp. 158–9.

³⁵ *EDL*, bk XIX, ch. 27, pp. 477–86.

³⁶ *EDL*, bk XV, ch. 7, pp. 394–5 (*The Spirit of the Laws*, p. 251).

³⁷ See, for instance, *EDL*, bk XVIII, chs. 4–7, pp. 435–7; bk XXI, ch. 2, pp. 28–9.

inherently associated with characteristic social organizations, involving a refusal to reduce one element to the other.³⁸ This standpoint lends credibility to the view, so often put forward, that the *Esprit des lois* marks a turning point in the prehistory of the social sciences. On a plane closer to eighteenth-century concerns, Montesquieu's approach entailed a conscience that a change in government policies was not sufficient to restore a sound moral environment in France.

Despite its innovation, however, Montesquieu's political theory entertained close links with the political horizon of antiquity. All the basic components of *esprit général* date back to the classical age. The inspiration as well as most of the contents of Montesquieu's theory of climate derive either directly from Plato, Hippocrates, Aristotle, Polybius, Strabo, and the like, or from their more modern interpreters, with Hippocrates and Galen providing Montesquieu with a model of physiology which effortlessly harmonized with that of Descartes. The idea that Asiatic peoples were political slaves by nature was a commonplace in antiquity and was allied to the widely accepted assumption of a fundamental difference in the national characters of Northern and Southern peoples. Even the 'no pain, no gain' argument was a common feature of the ancients' political thought, where it was illustrated, as in the *Esprit des lois*, with reference to the cases of fertile and barren countries. In Greek and Latin authors the appeal to the influence of natural causes was often associated with assessments of the significant role of governments in the shaping of habits, manners, and collective characters; the opposite influence was also emphasized, however, for in Plato's words 'the unwritten customs' are 'the bonds of the entire social framework'.³⁹ Many other apposite parallels might be cited, although it would suffice to recall Montesquieu's excerpts from Hippocrates' *Airs, Waters, Places* as evidence of his favourite sources, which account for the astonishing similarities in argument which the construction of *esprit général* shares with the classical world.⁴⁰

The most notable consequence of Montesquieu's incomplete emancipation from the ancient models of political thought is the lack of a proper dimension of social progress. His approach in the *Esprit des lois* seems synchronical even when episodes of the past are illustrated (the historical account of French feudalism looking more like an appendage than a component part of the book). This matches what Callot has called 'the imposing immobility' of Montesquieu's conception of nature.⁴¹ As is demonstrated by the role played in it by climate,

³⁸ M. Richter, 'Despotism', in P. P. Wiener, ed., *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (5 vols., New York, 1973), II, p. 9.

³⁹ *The Laws*, trans. T. J. Saunders (Harmondsworth, 1975), 793. Montesquieu's borrowings from the ancients are scrupulously listed in L. M. Lewin, *The Political Doctrine of Montesquieu's 'Esprit des Lois': its Classical Background* (New York, 1936).

⁴⁰ The excerpts are in Montesquieu, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. A. Masson (3 vols., Paris, 1950–5), III, pp. 712–13. I am grateful to Geoffrey Lloyd for drawing my attention to Montesquieu's debts to antiquity in general and to Hippocrates in particular.

⁴¹ E. Callot, *La philosophie de la vie au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1965), p. 147.

esprit général thoroughly reflects the static character of Montesquieu's system. *Esprit général* could hardly lend itself to theories of social development on the Scottish model.

3 Major and minor critics of the *Esprit des lois*

Early commentators focused on climate, which they separated from the general texture of the work, thus usually ignoring the complexity of *esprit général*. 'In the *Esprit des lois*, climate is what motion is in the Universe, that is, the universal cause of everything', as J. De La Porte wrote. There was even a poem that mocked the idea that 'climate alone is the arbitrator / of Gods and government', which was 'all the politics of our anonymous Solon'.⁴² As mentioned above, many striking statements in Montesquieu's work could easily convey the idea that he had ascribed an undisputed force to climate. The climatological theory was heavily attacked by Catholic critics as a fundamental element in Montesquieu's moral and religious relativism, whose open contrast with any view of the primacy of religion in history was apparent. 'What is the point of these reflections but to say that, if religion intends to take roots or continue to exist, it has to adjust itself to climate?'⁴³ The main bones of contention were the climatological explanation of polygamy, divorce, the diffusion of religions, suicide in England, and luxury. Even those who argued in support of the work showed some embarrassment at defending Montesquieu's treatment of these topics.⁴⁴ Such criticisms were fully on the mark, in so far as they signalled that Montesquieu's approach implicitly legitimized the existence of societies (as well as religions) of different types. He had explained that each society was made up of parts that were interconnected in a way which was not accidental (with religion as one of these parts), and social organizations could be accounted for thereby on a purely rational basis. Many early reviewers were scathing about Montesquieu's heavy reliance on the dubious evidence supplied by the classics as well as by controversial travel reports. It was convincingly demonstrated, well before Voltaire, that Montesquieu's climatological theory lacked a sound factual basis. As regards its inner logic, many pointed to the decisive impact on collective characters of moral factors like education, shared social values,

⁴² [J. de La Porte], *Observations sur l'Esprit des Loix, ou l'Art de lire ce livre, de l'entendre et d'en juger* (Amsterdam, 1751), pp. 88, 112; Bonneval, *L'Esprit des Loix en vers*, OCL, VI, pp. 245–6. But there were also those who, like d'Alembert, rejected this simplistic interpretation: see his 'Climat (Géog.)', in *Encyclopédie*, III, p. 534.

⁴³ [Abbé La Roche], 'Réponse à la défense de l'Esprit des Loix' (1750), OCL, VI, p. 226. See also J. B. L. Crevier, *Observations sur le livre de l'Esprit des Loix* (Paris, 1764).

⁴⁴ See A. de la Beaumelle, *Suite de la défense de l'Esprit des Loix ou Examen de la Réplique du gazetier ecclésiastique a la défense de l'Esprit des Loix* (1751), OCL, VI, pp. 247–312; [F. Risteanu], 'Réponse aux observations sur l'Esprit des Loix' (1751), in Montesquieu, *Lettres familières à divers amis d'Italie* (Rome, 1773), pp. 215–347. See also P. L. M. de Maupertuis, *Eloge de monsieur de Montesquieu* (Amsterdam, 1756), p. 24.

the example set by rulers, and so on. What a strange idea, one commentator remarked, to impute everything to physical causes ‘and nothing to passions, taste, prejudices, education, and fashion’, that is, ‘to man!’⁴⁵ Furthermore, historical evidence of the fact that national characters do change over time was easy to collect, and was actually cited by many reviewers.

The effectiveness of physical factors was questioned by Turgot. In addressing an audience of young *Sorboniques*, he argued that ‘education’ – that is, all our sensations and ideas – encompasses the influence of climate. The single thing that we can speak about with any certainty is that climates have a moral influence ‘through the objects which they present us with’. It would be important to assess the ‘hidden principles’ that act as links between climate and national character, but any natural difference in men’s souls ‘will always be unknown to us as it can never be the object of our reasonings’. Consequently, one should resort to physical causes only when the moral ones have proved ineffective in explaining facts. Turgot seems to turn to Montesquieu’s *esprit général* when he maintains that the characters of peoples are shaped by ‘a sort of general education’ made up of language, manners, religion, laws, government, and ‘circumstances’. Once so created, ‘mœurs’ (intended as ‘inner laws’) play a very effective part in politics; they are ‘the most powerful restraint [*frein*] for men and almost the single one for kings’. What is inconceivable is that ‘a happy proportion of body fluids’ could ever make men virtuous.⁴⁶

Turgot tends to make mores depend on stages of civilization, at least when dealing with the early stages.⁴⁷ During the phases of hunting and animal husbandry, mores are seemingly shaped by the mode of production, but as the agricultural stage is reached and real governments and states can be established, societies turn into complex mechanisms with the effect that the economic factor loses its primacy. At that point, the comprehensive concept of education referred to above seems to become not only an autonomous force, but also a decisive factor, through the achievements of science, in social development.⁴⁸ That his stadial theory was intended mainly as a key to the understanding of the past is evidenced by his full acceptance of Montesquieu’s portrayal of the kind of mores brought about by education under despotic rule. The demoralizing

⁴⁵ La Porte, *Observations*, pp. 87–8.

⁴⁶ In *TO*, I, see ‘Recherches sur les causes des progrès et de la décadence des sciences et des arts’ (1748), pp. 139–40; ‘Discours sur les avantages que l’établissement du christianisme a procurés au genre humain’ (1750), pp. 212–13; ‘Lettre à Madame de Graffigny sur les Lettres d’une péruvienne’ (1751), p. 253; ‘Plan d’un ouvrage sur la géographie politique’ (1751?), p. 262; ‘Plan de deux Discours sur l’histoire universelle’ (1751), pp. 293–4, 304. Turgot’s references to language had an antecedent in Condillac’s remarks about the connection between language and national character: ‘Essai sur l’origine des connoissances humaines’ (1746), in Condillac, *Œuvres philosophiques*, ed. G. Le Roy (3 vols., Paris, 1947–51), I, pp. 98–104.

⁴⁷ R. L. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 68–76.

⁴⁸ ‘Plan d’un ouvrage’, pp. 259ff.; ‘Plan de deux Discours’; and ‘Pensées et fragments’, *TO*, I, pp. 326, 330–1.

consequences of despotism affect both the private and the public sphere; ‘despotism perpetuates ignorance and ignorance perpetuates despotism’; so that, gradually, fear and subservience become a habit. Turgot’s Oriental ‘mollesse’, as resulting from slavery and polygamy, is derived from Montesquieu.⁴⁹

Voltaire repeatedly and harshly criticized the *Esprit des lois* for its lack of internal structure and, above all, for its misuse of historical sources. As regards *esprit général*, Voltaire took sides with the advocates of moral causes. It is true that he ascribed some basic features of peoples to climate, believing, like Montesquieu, that the passions had a physical basis; and that his own practice of history made him occasionally resort to climatological assertions.⁵⁰ But when he came to discuss the force of climate, he concluded that its influence was dwarfed by that of government. ‘Climate has some force, but government one hundred times more; religion associated with government is even more forceful.’ Climatological theory fully exemplified to Voltaire’s eyes Montesquieu’s carelessness at handling history (and logic), and he seemingly regarded some of those propositions as an affront to reason. According to Voltaire, misleading reasoning had been the true pillar of oppressive regimes throughout history; behind climatological fables there lay a betrayal of the moving forces of the Enlightenment.

To account for the effects of climate, Montesquieu tells us that he made a sheep’s tongue freeze . . . But a sheep’s tongue will never explain why the struggle between the secular and religious powers has outraged Europe and covered her in blood for more than six hundred years . . . Government, religion, and education are the causes of everything with the unfortunate mortals who crawl, suffer, and reason on this globe. Nurture the reason of men in the surroundings of mount Vesuvius, and along the rivers Thames and Seine; and, as a result, you would see no Konradin [of Hohenstaufen] handed over to the executioner to follow a pope’s advice; no Mary, Queen of Scots, dying after the last torture; and no catafalques set up by white penitents for a young Protestant guilty of suicide.⁵¹

In the *Lettres anglaises*, Voltaire does not indulge in those generalizing contrasts that constitute the irreducible content of national character literature, and we know that this was intentional. The draft of one of the letters (1728) shows how uneasy Voltaire felt about the sweeping statements so often made by travellers about national characters. Voltaire thought that ‘such general ideas are liable to too many exceptions’, whereas no mere traveller can grasp more than the surface of national life. In addition, national characters change over time: ‘truth in one age is error in another’.⁵² These views relate to his own later

⁴⁹ ‘Plan de deux Discours’, pp. 290–7. The excerpt entitled ‘Les caractères nationaux’ in ‘Pensées et fragments’, pp. 338–9, is mistakenly attributed by the editor to Turgot, whereas it is a translation of the beginning of Hume’s essay ‘Of National Characters’. For Turgot’s *Mémoire sur les municipalités*, see chapter 4 below.

⁵⁰ See, as instances of climatological remarks, *Essai sur les mœurs* (1756), *VOC*, XII, ch. 143, p. 370; XII, ch. 157, p. 439; XIII, ch. 183, p. 96.

⁵¹ ‘Commentaire sur l’*Esprit des Lois*’ (1777), *VOC*, XXX, pp. 456–7; see also pp. 442–5.

⁵² ‘Projet d’une lettre sur les Anglais à M***’ (1728), *VOC*, XXII, pp. 17–18.

writing of history, which he intended as a sort of political economy of mores. The opening sentences of *Essai sur les mœurs* are striking. What deserves to be brought to light by the historian, Voltaire argued, is not the sequences of kings and their battles, but ‘the spirit, the mores [*mœurs*], and the customs [*usages*] of the principal nations, drawn upon facts which one cannot afford to ignore’. He was opposing the disgusting tales of the ‘barbarous centuries’ built on a basis of ‘appalling lies’ to a bottom–up historiography of the civilization process, that is a historiography centred on institutions and beliefs.⁵³ In pointing to the progressive implications of the latter, Voltaire was putting forward a history of the opinions of peoples as the true counterpart of establishment history. The idea behind Voltaire’s declaration of intent was that it was opinion that ultimately ruled the world. The oppositional content of an idea that rapidly became a cornerstone of the French Enlightenment is apparent. In *Remarques pour servir de supplément à l’Essai sur les mœurs* (1763), he argued that the thread of modern history was the war between the empire and the papacy, and that it was a war in which one of the sides relied only on the power of belief. ‘Therefore, it is the history of opinion that is needed; once viewed through it, the chaos of events, factions, revolutions, and crimes becomes deserving of the consideration of the wise.’ There are opinions that have dramatically changed the behaviour of men. History is a theatre where the struggle between ‘fanaticism’ and ‘reason’ is eternally represented, and it is the philosopher’s duty to enlighten men through an authentic depiction of the horrors brought about by fanaticism.⁵⁴

Once viewed in this context, Voltaire’s references to national characters figure as historically grounded observations expressing his eagerness to depict civilization as dependent on the slow march of reason – in its incarnations as ‘opinion’ or ‘spirit’. Both are called into play, for example, to account for the striking differences that had occurred in the development of the French and English governments over the centuries. For, besides its favourable geographical situation, England owed its liberty to its ‘spirit’: ‘the English have something more solid, more thoughtful, more obstinate about their spirit than certain other peoples’. Thanks to this attitude, they managed to break with popish rule, while the French, ‘less serious [*plus léger*] people’, have been dancing with their own shackles. The contrast between the two nations recurs in Voltaire’s texts to the point that even the shared experience of seventeenth-century political unrest

⁵³ *Essai sur les mœurs*, XI, foreword, pp. 156–7; XII, ch. 81, p. 53. See also ‘Remarques pour servir de supplément à l’Essai sur les mœurs et l’esprit des nations’ (1763), *VOC*, XXIV, pp. 543–7, and *Le siècle de Louis XIV* (1751), in Voltaire, *Œuvres historiques*, ed. R. Pomeau (Paris, 1987), pp. 616–20.

⁵⁴ ‘Remarques pour servir de supplément’, pp. 547, 554, 569. Ceremonies, as well as belief, make up a religion, and whereas the former element can be accounted for on climatological grounds, the latter depends on ‘l’opinion, cette reine incostante du monde’: ‘Climat’ (1771), in *Questions sur l’Encyclopédie*, *VOC*, XVIII, pp. 200–2.

seemed to him to reflect their different ‘characters’. The Glorious Revolution, in which ‘iron decided everything’, had witnessed ‘a melancholic energy and a reasoned fury’, whereas the French ‘plunged into sedition at whim and for fun: women led factions; love both formed and broke up cabals’. At present, the main trait of English character is ‘love of freedom’.⁵⁵

But, if opinion may mould politics, government, regarded as part of a broadly intended educative process, seems to be a decisive factor in the shaping of public opinion itself. Voltaire believed that government was largely responsible for the attitudes of the French upper classes, whereas the mass of the people did not count, being thought of as incapable of rational thinking. Reason must first and foremost replace fanaticism ‘among the leading men’; later, it would progressively gain possession of the minds of the others, going down to ‘the people [*peuple*] themselves, who, though they do not know it, can see the moderation of their superiors and learn to be moderate themselves’. Voltaire’s *peuple* has very little to do with *les honnêtes gens*. ‘The spirit of a nation’, he argued, ‘always lies in the few who set the many to work, and feed and rule them.’ As an example of the government’s influence over mores, he ascribes the celebrated French *politesse* to Louis XIV’s benevolent politics. But the French government is implicitly blamed when Voltaire regrets that, in contrast with their English counterparts, French aristocrats neglect commercial activities. More generally, in France, talents were neither appreciated nor rewarded.⁵⁶

In the entry for ‘France, François, Français’ (1771) in the *Dictionnaire philosophique*, Voltaire is able to depict a less bleak portrait of French character, but in order to do so he is forced to resort to the virtues of climate. Providing that ‘each people has its own character, likewise each man’, national character is made up of two groups of elements: ‘climate and soil’ provide its unchangeable basis, whereas governments, religions, and education determine its variable parts. The ‘kernel’ of French character is still as Caesar found it, that is, the Frenchman is ‘prompt to make up his mind, ardent about a fight, impetuous in attack, easy to put himself off’. If, now, French character looks remarkably different, it is because of the established illiberal regime, which has made any political participation by the citizens impossible – ‘liveliness itself, which will survive forever, nowadays has nothing but the charms of society as

⁵⁵ ‘Gouvernement’ (1771), in *Dictionnaire philosophique*, VOC, XIX, pp. 292–7 (*Political Writings*, trans. D. Williams (Cambridge, 1994), p. 59); *Le siècle de Louis XIV*, p. 652; *Essai sur les mœurs*, XIII, ch. 180, pp. 61, 66–8; *Lettres philosophiques* (1734), VOC, XXII, pp. 104–5 (‘Sur le parlement’).

⁵⁶ *Le siècle de Louis XIV*, pp. 996, 979–80ff., 1063 (*The Age of Louis XIV and Other Selected Writings*, trans. J. H. Brumfitt (Washington, 1966), p. 239; trans. modified); *Dictionnaire philosophique*, pp. 279 (‘Goût’), 383–4 (‘Homme’); *Essai sur les mœurs*, XII, ch. 155, pp. 433–4; *Lettres philosophiques*, p. 111 (‘Sur le commerce’), 179–82 (‘Sur la considération qu’on doit aux gens de lettres’).

its object'.⁵⁷ Clearly enough, Voltaire adopted a climatological stance in order to make his political criticism more effective.

This duality of approach was typical of the French scene: while climatological remarks provided a sort of learned foundation, the political polemic was being brought increasingly to the fore.⁵⁸ National character themes played a substantial part in the French philosophers' discourse ultimately because they feared that the moral roots of society were in danger; this implied a dialectic between a reinvented original identity of France (through its history as well as the indestructible properties of its soil and climate) and its present corruption. Images taken from the civic humanist tradition, on the one hand, and memories of past greatness, on the other, were simultaneously called into play in an attempt to mark out the contrast with the current situation. This is shown, for instance, by abbé Coyer's famous dissertations on *Patrie* – 'we have forgotten the idea which was linked to this great word' – and *Peuple* – our ancestors wisely gave the people representation in the *états-généraux*.⁵⁹ Here, once again, Montesquieu had paved the way, in so far as almost the whole of the sixth part of the *Esprit des lois* is devoted to a historical analysis of feudalism in France.⁶⁰ If all this discussion may look very abstract, its protagonists intended it as a sort of battlefield for political agitation. What the chapter deals with are excerpts from a militant literature.

The climatological explanation was not entirely dismissed, notwithstanding its apparent flaws, since it was able to contribute to the reconstruction of French history, and, in particular, to the delineation of a standard of Frenchness prior to absolutism. The most common pattern of thought about the causes of collective character emerged as a blend of both moral and physical factors. The philosophers who, in their various ways, put the two kinds of determinants together were d'Alembert, Morelly, Goguet, Condillac, Mably, Diderot, Chastellux, Rousseau, Holbach, and Raynal.⁶¹ In associating climate with

⁵⁷ 'Franc ou Franq; France, François, Français', in *Dictionnaire philosophique*, pp. 178–82.

⁵⁸ See H. Vyverberg, *Human Nature, Cultural Diversity, and the French Enlightenment* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 64–87.

⁵⁹ [abbé Coyer], *Dissertations pour être lues: la première, sur le vieux mot de patrie: la seconde, sur la nature du peuple* (The Hague, 1755), pp. 15, 63–4.

⁶⁰ See E. Carcassonne, *Montesquieu et le problème de la constitution française au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1927). As regards history as capable of legitimizing the demands of the 'nation', see F. Furet and M. Ozouf, 'Deux légitimations historiques de la société française au XVIII^e siècle: Mably et Boulainvilliers', *Annales ESC*, 34 (1979), pp. 438–50.

⁶¹ The first four writers mentioned will not be dealt with in what follows: see d'Alembert, 'Analyse de l'Esprit des Lois' (1755), in *EDL*, I, pp. 99–100; d'Alembert, 'Climat (Géog.)', p. 534; Morelly, *Essai sur l'esprit humain* (1743; Geneva, 1971), pp. 4–5, 13–19; Morelly, *Essai sur le cœur humain* (1745; Geneva, 1970), pp. 14–16; Morelly, *Code de la nature*, ed. G. Chinard (1755; Paris, 1950); A.-Y. Goguet, *De l'origine des lois, des arts et des sciences, et de leur progrès chez les anciens peuples* (1758; 3 vols., Paris, 1820); Condillac, 'Essai sur l'origine des connoissances humaines', p. 98. The anonymous author of 'Caractère des nations' in *Encyclopédie*, II, p. 666, can be added to the list. La Mettrie unreservedly supported

government as causes of national character, most of these authors drew heavily on Montesquieu, demonstrating that the hints that he had made about the sort of protection that *esprit général* should guarantee to society when confronted by government by no means constituted seed fallen on stony ground.

4 A French historian: Mably

Mably's *Observations sur l'histoire de France* (1765) can be taken as an example of a standard sentiment. 'Je suis historien, je suis Français', so I feel that it is my duty to tell my fellow citizens some unpalatable truths. In Mably's account, early Frenchmen had been 'supremely [*souverainement*] free', but they lost their liberty because of the affluence which resulted from the conquests they made. French character emerged from the struggle of kings against the anarchic rule of feudal barons – while in the same period the English were engaged in limiting the prerogatives of kingship.

There developed different political views and different characters in the two countries. Their goals were opposite, as the royal power, with the support of public opinion, made as much progress in France as liberty in England. States take up habits to which they cling mechanically. If the English sometimes forgot their liberty, their distraction could not last long. Equally, if the French became irritated against the king, this would be nothing but a temporary effervescence, from which habit would soon lead them again under the yoke of monarchy.⁶²

The *esprit général* of England may effectively remedy many of the flaws in its political constitution; on the other hand, the same spirit of freedom could be severely impaired by the moral corruption brought about by avarice and luxury. The French case is different, as Frenchmen were forced by absolutist rule to relinquish 'the tradition of their customs', the most notable of which was the *états-généraux*. As an unfortunate result, the French people acquired 'a character in conformity with our government', that is, of an acquiescent type.⁶³ The French soul is now 'crushed [*affaïssé*]', since liberty is a necessary requirement for citizens' courage and industry.

the climatological argument, depicting man as 'une Plante ambulante': *L'Homme Machine* (1748), in J. O. de La Mettrie, *Œuvres philosophiques*, ed. F. Markovits (2 vols., Paris, 1987), I, pp. 72–3. Another advocate of the effects of climate, Buffon, remained strictly within the boundaries of natural history when dealing with national characters: he makes no mention of types of government, and the relationship he is eventually concerned with is the influence of *mœurs* on men's physical attributes and not the reverse. See Buffon, *De l'homme*, ed. M. Duchet (1749; Paris, 1971), pp. 270–1, 308–9, 311.

⁶² *Observations sur l'histoire de France* (1765), MCC, II, pp. 249–50.

⁶³ *ibid.*, pp. 254–85, 338–50. Elsewhere, he wrote that in France certain limits were set to monarchical power by the parliaments, an independent clergy, a proud aristocracy, and the arts and sciences: *De l'étude de l'histoire, a Monseigneur le Prince de Parme* (1765), MCC, XII, pp. 134–7.

The vision of the persistence and effectiveness of historically determined national characters lay at the root of Mably's deep concern with the French political state of affairs.

Great nations never behave out of reflection. They are moved, pushed ahead, held back, or agitated by a sort of interest which is the product of the habits they have taken up. This national character is so heavy that it carries everything away; and once it has been formed over time, it becomes even more unlikely that it may change in the essentials, because it is very rare that events as momentous as to affect the whole mass of citizens may occur, and consequently give them, with a new general interest, a new way of seeing and thinking.⁶⁴

The interplay of absolute rule and subjects' demoralization as expressed by the decline of French character made Mably suspect that any purely political solution would prove inadequate. Just after advocating the convocation of the *états-généraux*, he phrased the dilemma as follows: 'if the nation, through insufficient love for liberty and political enlightenment, is unable to take advantage of this event, the new *états-généraux* . . . will not solve our present problems, nor will it allow us to hope anything favourable for the future'.⁶⁵

Mably, like other French philosophers, often expressed the connection between political and moral crisis in another, less direct and apparently more universal, way. If the single ruling power in the country is the absolute will of kings, no real national character can establish itself because their changing passions are the exclusive criterion of mores. Lacking a true collective dimension, people cannot help resorting to individual struggles for wealth and recognition, and this results in the predominance of 'mollesse' via avarice and luxury as well as of a 'servile ambition'. This 'philosophical' mode of argument fully reveals that the fading of French character is implicitly equated to the loss of what was traditionally meant by republican virtues. Mably's historical relevance lies in his dissemination of the language of republicanism and, in particular, of its typical assessment of *mœurs*. Within that pattern of thought, the stress on the absolute importance of mores as a necessary complement to laws went hand in hand with his firm belief in the ability of governments, disguised as Roman censors, to create and implement dispositions and habits.

It is in *Du cours et de la marche des passions dans la société* (1775) that Mably couples civic humanism with the climatological thesis. Once he had adopted a sense-based theory of knowledge as well as a Montesquieu-like physiology, the influence of climate over passions became an obvious inference. His main climatological tool is Montesquieu's typology of Northern and

⁶⁴ *Observations sur l'histoire*, III, p. 304.

⁶⁵ *ibid.* Montesquieu, too, had maintained that 'la liberté même a paru insupportable à des peuples qui n'étaient pas accoutumés à en jouir'. *EDL*, bk XIX, ch. 2, pp. 459–60.