

1 The Emergence of Social Theory

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Social theory is an expression commonly used to avoid the more narrowly disciplinary label of sociological theory.¹ The shift from disciplinary divisions to trans-disciplinary sensibilities would require a study of its own, but since it is more than a passing fad, it implies a serious reconsideration of the historical development of the social sciences as well. What was social science like before it became disciplined? The question is not easily answered, because historical overviews tend to reproduce the disciplinary order. Many reserve an introductory part for the ‘prehistory’ of the discipline, portraying a gallery of ‘forerunners’ and ‘precursors’, but all too often the analysis remains anecdotal and anachronistic.

And yet the central concepts and assumptions of modern social science have a history that is considerably longer than that of the academic disciplines as they have become established in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The modern notion of the state, for example, may be said to have taken shape during the first half of the seventeenth century in the work of authors such as Bodin and Hobbes. In their writings, as Quentin Skinner has argued, the state became a secular and abstract concept; it was no longer viewed as the personal property of the ruler, and that notion became the conceptual foundation for modern political thought (Skinner, 1989).

Other examples could be mentioned, but perhaps the strongest claim for the early modern origins of the social sciences has paradoxically been made for the discipline that has taken greatest pride in its scientific progress: economics. In the beginning of the seventeenth century the notion of ‘political economy’ was introduced to mark the transition from the Aristotelian conception of the economy as private ‘household management’ to the study of larger, national economies and international trade. Political economy expanded during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and according to Margaret Schabas economists have ever since been rearranging the same constituents. The key properties of money (quantity, price level and velocity, interest rate), production and distribution (factor and commodity prices, market forces), and the national economy (national income, population, employment, balance of trade, exchange rates) were all articulated in the early modern period (Schabas, 2003: 172).

As these examples suggest, it is fundamentally misleading to restrict the social sciences to their contemporary, disciplinary, or transdisciplinary arrangements, and merely acknowledge an ill-defined ‘prehistory’. It is more accurate to take a longer view and include a ‘predisciplinary’ as well as a disciplinary stage in the development of modern social science (Heilbron, 1995). Predisciplinary social science,

covering the period from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century, was characterized, first and foremost, by the emergence of modern conceptions of the social world: modern notions of state, government and legislation; of commerce and the economy; of social relations and human societies.

A proper starting point for exploring the genesis of social theory would be to examine what is taken for granted today, namely the notions that constitute its vocabulary: the word ‘social’, its combination with other terms, and its derivatives. Arguing in terms of ‘social relations’ and ‘human societies’ is a distinctly modern mode of thinking. The terminological development is all the more relevant, since it provides a reasonably accurate indication of how the early forms of social thought emerged and evolved in the Euro-American part of the world. Although it has been claimed that ‘the social’ was ‘invented’ in the wake of the revolution of 1848 (Donzelot, 1984), or ‘discovered’ during the last decades of the nineteenth century (Mucchielli, 1998), the word and the theoretical perspectives associated with it arose about a century earlier.

Following the key terms, I will first present a brief outline of the formative period of social thought between 1750 and 1850. I will then focus in more detail on the Enlightenment and on the figures who have generally been seen as its most significant pioneers: Montesquieu and Rousseau in France, and the ‘moral philosophers’ of the Scottish Enlightenment. Rather than being merely ‘precursors’ or ‘forerunners’, they are more accurately portrayed as the pioneers or founders of social theory (for more detailed accounts see Berry, 1997, 2013; Heilbron, 1995).

The Vocabulary and Status of Social Theory

Intellectual historians have persuasively argued that in order to understand ideas we need to examine how they are embedded in particular ‘languages’ (Pocock, 1973; 2009). Among the best established intellectual discourses in early modern Europe were a religious and theological language, the language of politics, law and government, and the language of morals and morality. Since vocabularies give these languages a certain distinctiveness and autonomy, the formation of social theory can be understood by examining the emergence of a specific vocabulary and its uses in theoretically informed modes of analysis. According to the available evidence, it was in France during the decades after 1750 that a proper ‘social’ vocabulary emerged. From the 1750s onwards the adjective was used with a certain frequency, not in isolated and reified form as ‘the social’, as Hannah Arendt suggested (Arendt, 1998), but in connection to a rapidly growing number of nouns in expressions like the ‘social contract’, the ‘social order’, ‘social relations’, ‘social institutions’, and ‘the social system’ (Mintzker, 2008). The 1765 volume of Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopedia* described ‘social’ as a ‘word newly introduced into language’. The spread of the term was rapid and barely a decade later Mirabeau was already calling it a ‘dangerous word’, because of the multiplicity of ‘vague ideas it has allowed to emerge’. The new term was understood to be the adjective of the word ‘society’, a notion that has a much longer history, but that after 1750 developed in a closely

related manner. As a generic representation of human communities the modern concept of society has similarly been described as an ‘invention’ of the Enlightenment (Baker, 2001; Kaufmann and Guilhaumou, 2003).

The earliest occurrences of the term ‘social’ in the 1740s and 1750s were still related to the traditional meaning of the word society. The term referred to smaller human groups and gatherings, both in the sense of the aristocratic ‘high society’, the *société* or *monde*, and in the meaning of a legally recognized association with a particular objective or interest, such as certain commercial, learned, or religious ‘societies’. The latter meaning goes back to the notion of *societas* or partnership in Roman law. *Societas* had also been used to translate the Greek *politeia*, thereby designating the state as a ‘political’ or ‘civil society’. The critical change that occurred from the late seventeenth century onwards was that ‘civil society’ gradually came to refer to a sphere distinct from and potentially opposed to the state (Kaviraj and Khilnani, 2001; Riedel, 2011; Wagner, 2006).

The smaller gatherings and associations that were traditionally described as ‘societies’ typically required people to be ‘sociable’, and sociability was indeed a virtue associated with societies in the older sense of the word (Gordon, 1994; Hont, 2005). Contrary to the brutal state of nature that Hobbes had depicted, sociability was viewed either as a natural human inclination, an *appetitus societatis*, as the natural law theorist Grotius said, or as an interest-based mode of exchange, as in commerce and trading ‘societies’. The last form of association represented an intermediary mode of association. It was, as Kant said, a form of ‘unsocial sociability’, a type of relationship that differed from the Hobbesian war of all against all, as well as from the agreeable or affectionate bonds of friendship and family. This weaker notion of sociability, associated with exchange, commerce, or traffic in the broad sense of these terms, provided the foundation for new theories of state, economy, and civil society (Heilbron, 1998/2001; Hont, 2005, 2015).

The first uses of the word ‘social’, both in French and in English, still refer to the sociable qualities of human beings in smaller settings, but in particular Rousseau gave the term a new meaning (Mitzker, 2008). Instead of referring to properties that render a person sociable, Rousseau started using the adjective ‘social’ to qualify institutions, human relations, laws, and entire nations and states. From designating the character of a person in the sense of being social or sociable, it became a property of human communities. In the following, I will argue that this semantic shift can be traced to the work of Montesquieu, who transferred the idea of ‘character’ or ‘spirit’ from individuals to nations, attributing a central role to national character or national spirit in the functioning of states. When somewhat later Rousseau reformulated this idea in ‘social’ terms, it gave rise to a rapidly expanding new discourse on the structure and dynamics of human communities. What was previously described in religious, politico-judicial or moral terms was now defined as ‘social’, that is as belonging to ‘human society’ rather than to a religiously defined community of believers, a politically conceived unit of subjects or citizens, or to the private sphere of morals and morality. Using this generic, more abstract, more heterogeneous and relatively indeterminate term represented a way of thinking which allowed viewing political and moral issues in an entirely new manner. The arrangements of human

groups and individuals were no longer viewed in terms of subjection, but more generally as constituting relations of *interdependence* (Berry, 2013; Elias, 1970).

This new idiom formed the core of what would subsequently be labelled ‘social thought’, ‘social theory’, or ‘social science’. Representing a historical change of far-reaching consequence, this reconceptualization is best understood, not in and by itself, as is often done, but in relation to competing discourses about human communities. During the second half of the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries ‘social theory’ came to form a new perspective on human communities that was recognizably distinct from the established traditions of theological, legal, political, and moral theory. Since the term came to define a relatively coherent discourse, formulated in terms of ‘social relations’ and ‘human societies’, analytically focused on the structure of human interdependencies, one can indeed argue that social theory emerged during the Enlightenment not as a discipline, but as a new *intellectual genre* (Heilbron, 1995) or as a *language* (Terrier, 2011; Wagner, 2006). Although a specific perspective associated with a particular vocabulary and distinct type of reasoning, social theory initially remained part of the larger framework of moral philosophy, lacking the institutional characteristics that are commonly used to define disciplines.

The new vocabulary quickly spread from France and Scotland to other countries, and expanded further during the revolutionary era, which included the political revolutions in America and France and the Industrial Revolution in Britain. Both transformations, the political and the industrial, gave issues of government and society a profoundly new meaning and an unprecedented urgency. Preoccupied with the question of governing a ‘society’ that was founded on political rights and civil liberties, the emerging social sciences promised to deliver knowledge to national elites that could no longer rely on the dogmas of the divine right of kings and the institutions of the old regime. What kind of economic, social, and political processes could be expected to emerge under conditions of political liberty? And how might these be regulated and controlled by the authorities (Wagner, 1998)?

From the very beginning the new vocabulary simultaneously fulfilled descriptive and critical as well as performative functions. It pretended to account for realities that were improperly captured by traditional vocabularies, and this alternative conception initially represented an either moderate or more radical critique of the established structures (Israel, 2011). During the early phases of the American and the French revolutions the notion of society played a critical role in the break with the old regime. In numerous pamphlets and speeches, a new political order was demanded in the name of ‘society’ or the ‘nation’. In the revolutionary process in France, for example, deputies of the Third Estate became sensitive to relatively abstract arguments, in particular those Rousseau had proposed in *The Social Contract* (Bell, 2001; Godechot, 1964; Tackett, 1996). The authority of the King was disputed, and his function was considered legitimate only if it would henceforth represent ‘society’ or the ‘nation’. Attempts to codify this foundational role of ‘society’ in the new political order are an apt illustration of the significance of the new idiom. In August 1789, just after the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, a proposal was drawn up for the ‘Declaration of the Rights of Societies’. Every society, it was stipulated,

should have ‘the common good’ as its goal and needed to be organized in such a way that it would best serve the ‘interests of all’ (Belin, 1939: 34).

During the revolutionary turmoil, the idiom of social thought was enriched with a host of new expressions. One of them was ‘social science’. It appeared in all likelihood for the first time in France in the famous revolutionary tract of Sieyès, *What Is the Third Estate?* (1789). In the writings of Sieyès, Condorcet and other members of the Société de 1789, ‘social science’ referred to a broadly conceived new science of government. The expression developed out of the concept of *l’art social*, a notion probably best translated as social policy, which had previously been used in the circle of the physiocrats (Head, 1982). Social science was to have three main branches: legislation, political economy, and morals. During the liberal Republic (1795–1799), following the Terror (1793–1794), the role of these new sciences was officially instituted. Replacing the national academies, the Institute was organized in three departments for, respectively, the natural sciences, the ‘moral and political sciences’, and literature and the fine arts. The class for the moral and political sciences was involved in a variety of policy issues, but it did not last. After conflicts with the government, it was suppressed by Napoleon in 1803, re-emerging thirty years later as the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences (1832), which even then was still one of the earliest social science institutions in the world.

In the early nineteenth century, after the revolutionary years and following the international counter-revolutionary reaction and wars on a European scale, two types of terminological renewal were added to the expanding idiom. The first were neologisms derived from the word social, most notably ‘socialism’ and ‘sociology’. Although both terms have been found in Sieyès’s unpublished manuscripts (Guilhaumou, 2006), they appeared in print only during the 1830s. Intended to spell out certain consequences of thinking in terms of social relations, ‘socialism’ referred to the political consequences that stood in opposition to doctrines of individualism. Slightly later, in 1839, Auguste Comte forged the term ‘sociology’ as part of his undertaking to rethink the post-revolutionary changes in both the political and scientific realm. Comte conceived sociology as analogous to biology – another neologism of the 1790s. Just as biology was conceived of as an overarching and fundamental science of life, integrating botany, zoology, and medicine, sociology was to become a general and fundamental science of human societies. Comte elaborated in detail how and why sociology differed from Sieyès’s notion of ‘social science’, Condorcet’s ‘social mathematics’, and Saint-Simon’s ‘science of social organization’ or ‘social physiology’. At the same time he conceived the new science in opposition to the more traditional but then dominant conception of ‘moral and political sciences’. With few exceptions, Comte considered the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences to be a bastion of old-style metaphysics. Its leading members had indeed reconnected to classical moral philosophy and political theory. In their more conservative stance academicians consciously avoided expressions like ‘social science’ and the ‘social question’; both being associated with the revolutionary and republican fervour that the Academy wanted to combat and replace (Heilbron, 2015; 2017).

Indicative of the newly acquired significance of social thought during the French Revolution was that aside from neologisms, the word ‘society’ and the adjective ‘social’ also penetrated and partly transformed older intellectual traditions. The conservative thought of counter-revolutionary monarchists like Bonald and Maistre is a telling example. In works like *The Theory of Political and Religious Power in Civil Society* (1796) and *Analytical Essay on the Natural Laws of the Social Order* (1800), Bonald radically rejected the new order and the related tendency to take the empirical sciences as the intellectual model for social thought. Although rooted in the pre-revolutionary Catholic Counter-Enlightenment, Bonald’s thinking was simultaneously shaped by the fact that it emerged as a reaction to the Revolution (McMahon, 2001). Distinct from the more historically oriented traditionalism of Burke, Bonald proposed a social theory that was derived from the assumption of a natural social order, originally created by God. Existing societies were nothing but manifestations of this original society, and any encroachment upon it would inevitably lead to crises. Primary social relations were immutable and subject to invariable laws. Just as the relations between a father, a mother, and a child constituted a natural hierarchy, so did the relations between the monarch, the nobility, and the people or, in more abstract terms, between power, ministership, and subservience (Beik, 1956; Klinck, 1996).

What holds for the conservative reaction to the Revolution can also be observed for the liberal tradition. Aside from the predominantly Anglo-American form of liberalism, in which the emphasis is on limiting state power, assuring the liberty of citizens, and favouring market exchange, another strand of liberalism was more broadly concerned with the conditions for preserving liberty. This current, rooted in the aristocratic opposition to absolutism and also in the work of Montesquieu (De Dijn, 2008), took shape in France and developed further as a reaction to the Revolution and the Terror. Carried by more secular factions of the notables, this form of aristocratic liberalism tends to be historical rather than analytical, more interested in institutional structures than in general principles, and has a more ‘sociological’ than a strictly political or economic focus (Siedentop, 2012). As compared to the centrality of market forces in laissez-faire liberalism, more weight is given to mores, to morals, and manners. This line of thinking was developed, among others, by Benjamin Constant, Alexis de Tocqueville, and their successors (Geenens and Rosenblatt, 2012).

If social thought expanded markedly during the revolutionary decades around 1800, it was not restricted to any political or ideological stance in particular, neither to liberalism, as some have argued (Seidman, 1983), nor to conservative thought, as both Marxists and conservatives have claimed (Nisbet, 2004; Zeitlin, 1968). Social theory initially emerged in opposition to absolutism, but soon the new vocabulary was also used by defenders of the absolute monarchy like Linguet in his *Theory of Civil Laws or Fundamental Principles of Society* (1767), by a physiocrat like Le Trosne in *On the Social Order* (1777), or by the orthodox Catholic Abbé Durosoy in his *Social Philosophy* (1783). Rather than expressing a specific philosophical or political stance, the emergence of social thought was more broadly both a reflection on and an ingredient of the transformative changes that took place between 1750 and

1850. Strictly speaking it was neither simply the ‘discovery’ of a pre-existing reality nor merely an ‘invention’ that was unrelated to broader social changes and that would subsequently be ‘institutionalized’ in the process of revolutionary change (Baker, 2001; Kaufmann and Guilhaumou, 2003). Social theory was obviously itself socially constructed, produced by groups of intellectuals who had gained a greater degree of autonomy from the established powers, but their collective work was informed by social changes, processes in which it in turn intervened and which it helped to define.

Aside from the political transformations of which the American and the French revolutions were the symbols, early forms of social thought were equally shaped by ongoing industrialization, by the spread of factories, and the formation of an impoverished working class in cities. Urban poverty and pauperism became the most pressing public issues during the first half of the nineteenth century. Conservative groups tended to view them as a moral issue, as a matter of character and self-discipline, and as a question of faith and charity. Their opponents – mainly republicans and radicals – defined poverty as a ‘social question’, implying the need for organized public intervention. In the post-revolutionary struggles over the role of the state in poverty relief intermediary positions emerged as well, and some of them typically also used the adjective ‘social’. Opposing ‘socialism’, but sensitive to the needs of working-class families, currents of ‘social Catholicism’ emerged from the 1820s onward (Duroselle, 1951). Distinct from what was in the process of becoming codified as classical economics, political economy also included schools of ‘social economics’, some of which sought to define the discipline in ways that opposed the dominant *laissez-faire* approach (Gueslin, 1998).

Although the geography of the early forms of social theory included metropolitan cities in various regions in Europe and multiple forms of transnational circulation, France and Scotland were its leading intellectual centres. Translations, which provide an indication for the direction of the international flow of ideas, were made above all from French, which was the *lingua franca* of the Enlightenment. English came second and grew in importance, in no small part because of the prominence of the Scottish Enlightenment (Oz-Salzberger, 2006). The pivotal role of French contributions is also indicated by the spread of central notions. It took about three decades, for example, before the French expression *science sociale* was properly translated into English as ‘social science’ rather than ‘moral science’ (Claeys, 1986). References to pauperism and poverty as defining the ‘social question’ seem to have first appeared in French as well; the expression spread to England through newspaper reports about the events of the July Revolution of 1830 (Case, 2016). The term ‘socialism’ seems to have first appeared in Britain in the early 1830s in the movement of Robert Owen, but it was directly related to Saint-Simonian reformers (Claeys, 1986).

The introduction of the adjective ‘social’ and its derivatives into German-speaking countries took longer, but they gradually took hold there as well (Geck, 1963). In Germany, however, new ideas of civil society and social science were largely incorporated within the framework of the *Staatwissenschaften*, the sciences of state (law, economics, public administration). Rooted in eighteenth-century cameralism, this state-centric tradition was refashioned in the nineteenth century by idealist

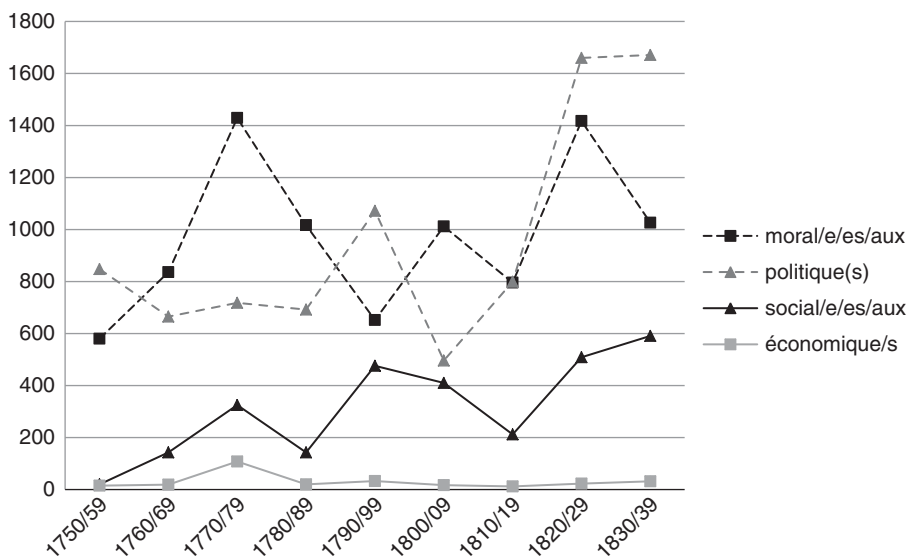


Figure 1.1 Number of occurrences of the adjectives *moral*, *political*, *social*, and *economic* in French by decade (1750–1840)
 Source: Database Frantext, see www.frantext.fr/

philosophers such as Hegel for whom the state remained the leading and encompassing concept of socio-economic and civic organization (Steinmetz, 1993; Wagner, 1990).

The popular uprisings of 1848 that swept across Europe put the social question on the political agenda in all advanced countries. One way of dealing with it was by more seriously studying social problems and deliberating about possible solutions. With the rise of organized worker movements in the wake of 1848, the notion of ‘social science’ spread rapidly, capturing the urgency of confronting the revolutionary threat to the established order. Related to the ‘social question’, it referred to social inquiries and initiatives for social reform. Prior to the establishment of university chairs and academic journals, the movement led to the forming of the earliest ‘social science’ organizations: the (British) National Association for the Promotion of Social Science (1857), the American Social Science Association (1867), and the German Verein für Socialpolitik (1873). At approximately the same time as ‘social science’ came to be associated with studying the social question and initiating social reform – from the 1830s to the late nineteenth century – Comte’s term ‘sociology’ belatedly started to gain acceptance for the more properly scientific ambitions of social science. This occurred first in Britain and the United States, notably through the work of Herbert Spencer, and slightly later in France and Germany as well.

Since France played a central role in the formative years of social theory, it is interesting to consider a quantitative indication of its early development. As compared to more or less competing terms, such as the adjectives *political*, *moral*, and *economic*, the frequency of the word ‘social’ in a large database of French texts shows a clearly upward trend between 1750 and 1840 (Figure 1.1). The increasing use is significant, not

so much in itself, but as compared to rival adjectives. The adjective ‘economic’ during this period still seems a very specialized term, appearing far less often; its use doesn’t display any temporal trend either. The adjectives ‘moral’ and ‘political’ were continuously used more often than ‘social’, but their frequency tends to fluctuate, although ‘political’ was on the rise, especially after the collapse of the Napoleonic Empire. ‘Social’ was rarely ever used before 1750. Some growth occurs in the 1750s; it continues strongly in the 1760s and 1770s, and temporarily falls back in the 1780s, but reaches a higher level during the revolutionary decade of the 1790s. The comparison with the other adjectives, however, provides no evidence that ‘social’ discourse would somehow ‘dominate’ French learned texts during the latter half of the eighteenth century (Mintzker, 2008: 500). After decades of marked growth, a temporary decline of the use of the adjective ‘social’ occurs during the authoritarian Napoleonic years (1799–1814). Growth picks up again in the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s. During the 1840s (not represented in the graph), the frequency reaches its highest level, due in all likelihood to debates about the ‘social question’ and the political upheavals of 1848, although the frequency remains below the level of the more common notions ‘political’ and ‘moral’.

The Character of Nations

One of the earliest and most prominent examples of social thought was the work of an author, Montesquieu (1689–1755), who himself never used the adjective ‘social’. The admired, and widely discussed and translated Montesquieu, a provincial nobleman and member of the parliament of Bordeaux, pioneered the new approach. Although his ground-breaking contributions were widely recognized, he formulated them in a largely conventional idiom. Motivated by his opposition to absolutist rule, his grand study *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) drew attention to a whole conglomerate of phenomena and principles that eluded the power of the state, but that were nonetheless essential for politics and government. What in reality ‘rules’ people, Montesquieu argued, is not so much the monarch or the laws of the land, but the ‘general spirit’ of the nation. That spirit is the outcome of a complex combination of ‘physical’ and ‘moral’ factors (climate, legislation, morals and manners, commerce, religion), and no ruler should ignore this complex infrastructure of state power; quite to the contrary, legislators are best advised to go along with the ‘spirit of the nation’.

Montesquieu’s quest for the ‘spirit of the laws’ went well beyond the existing intellectual genres. He wrote about morals and manners, but in contrast to French moralists in particular, related them to climate, legislation, and political rule. He proposed a typology of state forms, but unlike political theorists linked them to a wide range of moral and physical conditions. The result of his exploration was such a broad and complex characteristic of human communities that neither the politico-legal nor the moral vocabulary sufficed. The expression ‘the spirit of the laws’ indicates that Montesquieu was concerned with the prerequisites of political and legal structures, and it was in the course of this analysis that he advocated the separation of powers, the rule of law, and the preservation of civil liberties. The

analytical core of his work, however, is a more general phenomenon: ‘the spirit of the nation’. Nations are ruled by this spirit rather than by their ruler, and legislation and politics should be attuned to this spirit. As David Hume summarized it: ‘the laws have, or ought to have, a constant reference to the constitution of governments, the climate, the religion, the commerce, the situation of each society’ (Hume, 1902: 396).

Montesquieu’s monumental work integrated and synthesized elements from various intellectual traditions. His early *Persian Letters* (1721) was a comedy of manners in which he depicted the absolute power of the monarch as an awkward superstition that did not fail to amaze his Persian noblemen. The entertaining descriptions were an enormous success. Montesquieu travelled to Paris, participated in salon life and engaged with the issues of morals and morality (love, friendship, happiness, taste, duty) that were favourite topics of salon conversation. Gradually, however, he dropped his literary plans and shifted his interests to politics. Having been associated with a political society, the ‘Club de l’Entresol’ (1724–1731), he travelled to England (1729–1731), and returned to his estate, where in 1734 he started working on a comprehensive study on law and the state. His *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline* (1734) had just been published, Voltaire’s *Philosophical Letters* (1734) was very much in the limelight, and interest in the enlightened English nation was widespread. Since reform initiatives such as the ones discussed in the Club de l’Entresol had failed, it seemed urgent to delve deeper into questions of government and state power.

Fourteen years later, in 1748, *De l’esprit des lois* was published. Many if not all of its components have been shown to be related to existing traditions of thought. Prior to Montesquieu, however, few if any had ever produced such a comprehensive and subtly differentiated analysis of nations. The central concept, the ‘general spirit of the nation’, is already present in his early work. Not immediately related to the politico-legal theories that most interpretations have emphasized, it is informed by his experiences in Madame Lambert’s salon and the French tradition of moralistic writings (Heilbron, 1995; 1998/2001). Montesquieu arrived in Paris as the author of an entertaining satire. For seven years he was part of the aristocratic scene in the capital, but his literary career never materialized. Driven by his opposition to absolutism, his writings were more specifically based on integrating points of view other than the legal and the political with each other. The originality of *The Spirit of the Laws* is that it was a broad and empirically oriented synthesis of hitherto separated politico-legal, historical, and moral perspectives (Heilbron, 1995).

An early text written for his *Treatise of Duties* (1725) contains a passage that is directly borrowed from the moralistic literature that had flourished in France since the seventeenth century. What Montesquieu was describing, however, was not a person, but a nation. ‘Societies’, he wrote, are merely a ‘union of the spirit’ and differ from each other by their ‘common character’. This ‘character’ is the ‘effect’ of a long and complicated sequence of causes, but as soon as it is formed, it becomes the ruling power (Montesquieu, 1949: 114). Here Montesquieu uses the way people were observed in salons to characterize a society. What he had in mind in composing *The Spirit of the Laws* was perhaps a kind of character sketch or portrait, but of