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Montesquieu: An Examination of the Respective Advantages
(and/or Consequences) of Commerce Between States

Charles Moore

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Scholars have notably studied Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* for his regime typology and his writing on the separation of powers within a state. However, in recent years, a wave of liberal internationalists have looked to Montesquieu for his commentary on the effects of commerce in the international arena. Primarily, they cite Montesquieu for his claim that "The natural effect of commerce is to lead to peace. Two nations that trade with each other become reciprocally dependent; if one has an interest in buying, the other has an interest in selling" (SL, XX.2). The innate pacifying effect of commerce is one highly regarded by Montesquieu, but it is important to note that commerce itself is not an end all be all solution to eradicate warfare; in fact, Montesquieu refers to the ancients (i.e. Rome and Marseilles, as well as Alexander the Great) as examples of how war and commerce can have direct relationships with one another (Radasanu 1).

The current state of commerce has changed due to the effects of war as well as the shift in the type of liberty commonly practiced, which differs today from the one defined by the Ancients. The type of commerce employed plays a pivotal role in the overall effect that commerce can have; in some cases, transforming the natural effect of commerce to one of exploitation. To battle the qualms of commerce executed poorly, Montesquieu advises against monopolies of trade in goods or countries, monarchs and nobles from participating in commerce, and certain countries so destitute that they need everything from participating in commerce at all. Still, economic commerce can be incredibly advantageous and crucial to develop mutual dependency, but the initial advantages of commerce are dependent on several factors, such as security, location, tolerance, wealth, assets, and morality; yet, once commerce is engaged these factors can be transformed by its effects. The effects of commerce may not be the perfect

solution to establish universal, international peace, but the widespread advantages of commerce make war an antiquated endeavor.

If commerce is to pacify nations, it must first exist between nations. Montesquieu claims that “Commerce cures destructive prejudices, and it is an almost general rule that everywhere there are gentle mores, there is commerce and that everywhere there is commerce, there are gentle mores” (SL XX.1). However, there are certain circumstances that preclude commerce as well as significant historical events that are tantamount for the growth of global commerce and thus the increase in its power. Robert Howse points out the following:

Montesquieu claims that commerce can cure “destructive prejudices” and render manners (*moeurs*) gentle. But he also, and equally emphatically, suggests that prejudices and ferocious manners impede or prevent commerce: “[In the case of the Romans and the Parthians] far from there being commerce, there wasn’t even communication: ambition, jealousy, religion, hatred, manners kept everything apart.” Does not then the disease itself prevent the proposed cure? (Howse 2)

Howse is correct in his assessment that the disease, destructive mores, can prevent commerce from existing, but only to a degree. It is not enough for a nation to refuse commerce with another nation based on destructive mores to be unaffected by that nation’s commerce. Though two nations may refuse to trade with each other, if they permit any level of commerce to exist, there is the potential for indirect contact. The most immediate form of indirect contact would be if both nations who refuse to trade with each other have no such restriction on trade with a third nation. In this way, “Commerce has spread knowledge of the mores of all nations everywhere; they have been compared to each other, and good things have resulted from this” (SL XX.1). Therefore, while it is possible for the disease to prevent the cure in certain extreme cases, the power of commerce has reached a high enough degree that resisting its effects becomes incredibly difficult. This difficulty does not remove the possibility that two nations may

never trade together because of destructive mores, but adds pressure for the two nations to change their mores based on each other despite a lack of direct commerce.

A large portion of Montesquieu's writings on commerce is the result of reflecting on past events. The history of commerce includes many significant changes that helped develop the commerce that exists today, including the creation of superior ships, the compass, and letters of exchange. The influential power that commerce held was limited by the extent it could travel, so as different developments made commerce a more viable option globally, the effect that commerce had on mores increased. In the case of shipbuilding, there were limitations on how far the ships could travel as well as in which direction. Without a doubt, the way a ship is built factors into the speed in which it travels. Montesquieu examines "this slowness of the Indian ships, which in an equal time, could go but a third of the distance covered by the Greek and Roman ships... The Indian ships made of rushes drew less water than the Greek and Roman vessels made of wood joined with iron" (SL XXI.6). In this case, due to the speed and size differences of Indian ships vis-à-vis Greek and Roman ships, the ships of the Greeks and Romans could carry more cargo for greater distances, enabling them to trade with greater advantages and to reach locations that would be too difficult or of too little profit to Indian ships.

Moreover, the way ships had to travel before the creation of the compass limited the reach of commerce, for "In those times, navigators were obliged to follow the coast, which was their compass, so to speak" (SL XXI.6). The limitations on travel meant that alternative routes were highly sought after and expeditions to discover different trade routes were attempted multiple times. For instance, "We learn from history that before the discovery of the compass, there were four attempts to sail around Africa", but such a trip was too difficult and until the

compass it was more “natural to engage in commerce with east Africa by way of the Red Sea” (SL XXI.10).

As history proves and Montesquieu writes, “The compass opened the universe, so to speak. Discovery was made of Asian and Africa of which only some coasts had been known, and of America, which had been completely unknown” (SL XXI.21). The discovery of two new worlds strengthened commerce and extended its reach to new locations, thus making commerce more appealing to many powerful nations, such as the French, English, Spanish, Dutch, and Portuguese. Furthermore, the colonization of America established strong commerce between colonies and their mother countries. With the constant improvement of shipbuilding and navigation, the strength and reach of commerce is enhanced and accelerated, making it more difficult for destructive mores, the disease, to prevent commerce from spreading gentle mores, the cure.

A vital invention for the survival of commerce to grow to the extent at which it exists today occurred from the creation of letters of exchange. Montesquieu notes that when the philosophy of Aristotle was accepted by the great minds of the West, they made no distinction between the explanations of lending at interest with commerce; thus deeming commerce an act conducted by not only mean, but dishonest people as well. The mistake made in condemning commerce, a naturally permitted and potentially necessary thing, led to the persecution of Jews in order to take their wealth by force. Moreover, this labeling of commerce with infamy led to the confiscation of many goods owned by the Jews (who prospered greatly from commerce), and if not for the invention of letters of exchange, the property of those who had gained from commerce would have continued to be collected by those with power, and commerce would remain to be associated with the most horrible usuries (SL XXI.20). The letters of exchange

ensured that commerce could travel internationally while avoiding violence, for “the richest trader had only invisible goods, which could be sent everywhere and leave no trace anywhere” (SL XXI.20).

The power of commerce to cure destructive mores is one that has grown throughout history through the advancement of shipbuilding, navigation, and letters of exchange. This ability to pacify nations is one too complex to be as simple as a vaccine for a disease. While commerce has advantages and characteristics that make mutual dependency more tempting than war, commerce does not necessarily eliminate war, but rather reduces the reasons for war to exist. This results in commerce creating and benefiting from the existence of war to a degree that makes war less viable with commerce than without. The relationship between war and commerce, as described by Montesquieu, can be viewed both idealistically and realistically.

Idealistically, the effects of commerce make war less advantageous and thus less desirable to nations who would rather maximize their benefits by participating in commerce. Through an intricate system of trade routes, economical gain, and competitive advantage, a system of mutual dependency would defray any motivation for war; establishing the end result of international peace theory: no war. However, while Montesquieu points out that the “natural effect of commerce is to lead to peace” (SL XX.1), he examines the reality of the situation and historical events to address the fact that the motivations for war may be hampered by commerce but are in no way eliminated. The effect commerce has on war is one that leads to peace, yet there is no guarantee how long it may take for commerce to lead nations to peace, or if peace will actually be secured in all circumstances. Moreover, as is the case for the relationship between Marseilles and Rome, a nation’s commerce can benefit from war.

In earliest times there were great wars between Carthage and Marseilles over fishing grounds. After the peace they both engaged in economic commerce. Marseilles was the more jealous because, while equaling its rival in industry, it had become inferior in power; this is the reason for its great faithfulness to the Romans. The war the Romans waged against the Carthaginians in Spain was a source of wealth for Marseilles, which served as their storehouse. The ruin of Carthage and Corinth increased further the glory of Marseilles (SL XXI.11)

Though Marseilles was not the actual nation to wage war with Carthage and Corinth, they had a vested interest to side with the nation that did: Rome. In this circumstance, war is not prevented by commerce, but neither is commerce the instigator. Though Marseilles had a commercial interest in the war on Carthage, Montesquieu argues that “The Romans were never notable for jealousy over commerce. It was as a rival nation and not as a commercial nation that they attacked Carthage” (SL XXI.14). Therefore, the relationship between Marseilles and Rome proves that Montesquieu understood there were commercial advantages to go to war, and he turned to an examination of Athens and Alexander the Great for ways in which war has helped contribute to the development of commerce.

The relationship between the commerce of Athens and war is not explicitly stated in *The Spirit of the Laws*, however, it is implied by Montesquieu that a greater utilization of their naval powers would have significantly improved their benefits from commerce. Though the use of their navy does not specifically mean for conquest purposes, such an option can be inferred by Montesquieu’s writings as one of the possible choices to enhance the commercial enterprises of Athens. The error that Athens made, and Montesquieu notes, is that Athens failed to use the entirety of the resources at their disposal.

Athens, filled with projects for glory... more attentive to extending its maritime empire than to using it, with a political government such that the common people distributed the public revenues to themselves while the rich were oppressed, did not engage in the great commerce promised it by the work of its mines, the multitude of its slaves, the number of its sailors, its authority over the Greek towns, and, more than all that, the fine institutions of Solon. Its trading was limited almost entirely to Greece and the Black Sea, from which it drew its sustenance. (SL XXI.7).

Athens was poised to extend its commerce to a global level that would have turned their sustainable trading system into one of immense prosperity. At the very least, Athens could have established more trading routes to increase the size and reach of their commerce; they certainly had the necessary access to trade outposts, ships, and manpower to do so. If, for whatever reason, a nation would be unwilling to take part in commerce with Athens or more locations needed to be found in order to extend commerce, Athens could have used their maritime powers to do so. While Athens might have been able to use their maritime powers to find new trade locations without resorting to conquest, Montesquieu's understanding of the ancients meant the sea-based method for Athens to maximize its commerce was conquest. Though "Today one discovers lands by sea voyages; in early times, one discovered seas by conquest of lands" (SL XXI.9). Still, despite the advantages Athens had to increase participation in commerce, its fundamental reliance on virtue made commercial engagement intrinsically undesirable and potentially harmful to its future survival, thus deterring Athens from strengthening its commercial reach.

Where Athens failed to engage in war to extend its commerce, Alexander the Great succeeded. "Montesquieu's portrayal of Alexander, which abstracts from this conqueror's love of glory and his masterful capacity to achieve it, suggests that we ought to assess his accomplishments in light of the progress that would follow him" (Radasanu 10). The success that Alexander had in strengthening maritime commerce came after he conquered the Indies. It is important to note that it was not the conquest of the Indies that strengthened maritime commerce, for, in fact, the Persians had reached as far the Indus and would have been able to trade with the Indies had their religious values not barred them from the idea of maritime commerce (SL XXI.8). Rather, Alexander's success was from his "design of uniting the Indies with the west by a maritime commerce" (SL XXI.8) and the fact that in trying to strengthen commerce Alexander

did not allow himself to be constrained by religious prejudices. Even though other factors differentiated the great commercial enterprises that Alexander was able to undertake in comparison to Persia, Alexander would not have been able to do anything had he not mobilized his forces to conquer new lands.

The relationship between commerce and war may have the natural effect of leading to peace, but the consideration of Rome and Marseilles as well as Alexander the Great prove that commerce and war can have other effects. Though commerce can benefit indirectly and directly from war, there is a progression throughout history that has made Montesquieu's initial statement (that commerce leads to peace) increasingly true. One such progression can be seen through the improvement of ships, which combined with the invention of the compass, made navigation through sea voyages more efficient than navigation via land, and opened the world to itself. Additionally, the difference between the liberty of the Ancients and the liberty that Montesquieu associates with England affects the success of commerce.

The significance of liberty and commerce is one that exists independent of whether the liberty is that of the Ancients or that of England. Liberty is vital for commerce to exist, for without liberty, commerce could not function properly. On a fundamental level, commerce needs the aspect of liberty that guarantees property rights; without a guarantee of property, there is no real reason for commerce to occur, otherwise the work an individual puts in to benefit from commerce could easily be confiscated. For instance, in a despotic state, Montesquieu notes that discussing the kind of commerce that occurs "is useless to talk about [for there is a g]eneral rule: in a nation that is in servitude, one works more to preserve than to acquire; in a free nation, one works more to acquire than to preserve" (SL XX.4).

This discrepancy falls back to the fact that in a despotic state, if an individual prospers, their prosperity can be removed within the bounds of the constitution. Without their liberty, especially property rights, the goal of an individual is to preserve their current livelihood in the hopes that future action from the despot will not detriment them even further. However, the existence of liberty is not enough for there to be truly successful commerce. “If Corinth is a guidepost, then we might conclude that commerce requires freedom of the passions and the absence of virtue since virtue would subject the individual desires and interests to the will of the city as a whole” (Radasanu 5). As Athens showcases, the liberty of the Ancients, when focused on virtue, can not lead to the same level of successful commerce as the liberty that exists in modern times.

Liberty as viewed by the Ancients is not the same as the liberty Montesquieu associates with England and commercial success. The liberty of the ancients focuses on the group (virtue) whereas the liberty of England focuses on the liberty of the individual. When considering the goals and values that an individual would have when attempting to engage in commerce, the liberty of the Ancients is one that is not conducive to commerce. This can be seen through Montesquieu’s discussion on Athens. While Athens had an impressive maritime force and all the resources necessary to create large-scale, successful commerce, the focus on subjecting the individual to the interests of the group were too heavy of a burden for a truly successful commerce, for if Athens succeeded commercially, then its values would be corrupted and its military would fail. Therefore, the type of commerce that Athens needed had to be regulated by frugal mores, but the spirit of commerce does not align with frugality (Radasanu 5). The position that Athens was in meant their commerce was not successful enough to off-set the devaluation of

their virtue, but Athens was simply not frugal enough to maintain their virtue, leading “us to conclude that [Montesquieu] finds neither its virtue nor its commerce impressive” (Radasanu 5).

The fact that the Ancients valued the success of the group over the liberty of the individual does not mean that traders in modern times are free to do whatever they wished. In fact, “this would instead be the servitude of commerce. That which hampers those who engage in commerce does not, for all that, hamper commerce. It is in countries of liberty that the trader finds innumerable obstacles; the laws never thwart him less than in countries of servitude” (SL XX.12). The subjugation of traders to the policies of the nation to serve the greater good of commerce is similar to virtue in that both place an emphasis on the success of the state, but the former remains free to pursue their passions within the confines of policies, whereas the latter must continuously place the interests of the city as whole over individual interests. Another difference between the liberty of the Ancients and modern liberty is that for his example of modern liberty in England, there is no suggestion for traders to moderate their commercial endeavors; frugality is not a concern.

For Montesquieu, England is the closest to a perfect model for the way a nation should conduct itself politically and economically. England is a nation “made comfortable by peace and liberty, freed from destructive prejudices... inclined to become commercial” (SL XIX.27). With a strong coordination of its legislative, executive, and judicial powers, England earns the trust of all of its citizens that security is provided. The sense of security in their liberty and the way England conducts political interests, make commercial ventures very tempting for individuals. Though English traders may be hampered by English law, they are ultimately free to be as successful as possible, for there is no need for frugality or moderation to preserve their virtue, because virtue is not what guarantees their security.

Their security is guaranteed by the understanding between the state and individuals that if the state is endangered, so too is the livelihood of the individual, thus providing sufficient incentive for individuals to follow the laws and to give the necessary resources to remain safe in the nation they reside. Therefore, a trader can have an immense amount of prosperity, despite having obstacles placed before him. Though the trader finds new difficulties on an individual level, with all traders being hampered in favor of commerce, all traders take part in a greater commerce because of their individual sacrifices.

The success of English traders is in part because the liberty of England is well coordinated with the other aspects of the country. For Montesquieu, England provides the template for how commerce should be employed by a nation:

Other nations have made commercial interests give way to political interests: England has always made its political interests give way to the interests of commerce.

This is the people in the world who have best known how to take advantage of each of these three great things at the same time: religion, commerce, and liberty (SL XX.7)

England facilitates commerce to such a degree, that their power derives, in large part, from its commercial success. As their commerce expands, so too does their power; and when their power extended to America, it brought forth the question of whether or not the commerce established by colonialism is exploitative, a question which can then be extended to commerce between nations who benefit disproportionately.

If exploitation is based solely on economic gain, than the relationship between a mother country and its colonies would definitely classify as an exploitative relationship, but the benefits of commerce are more than just economic gain. The benefits of commerce can be peace between nations through mutual dependency, the softening of destructive mores through interactions and comparisons of different mores from different nations, and security for colonies or smaller

nations through an economically disproportionate relationship with a mother country or larger nation.

The purpose of these colonies is to engage in commerce under better conditions than one has with neighboring peoples with whom all advantages are reciprocal. It has been established that only the mother country can trade with the colony, and this was done with a very good reason...

The disadvantage to the colonies, which lose the liberty of commerce, is visibly compensated by the protection of the mother country, which defends them by her arms or maintains them by her laws (SL XXI.21).

The purpose in these two circumstances is not for the colony of small nation to succeed in commerce in the same way that a new town or empire would; rather the goal is to extend commerce through the creation of a colony and provide security to that colony through the strength of the mother country. Similarly, a small nation can gain the strength of a larger nation by disadvantaging itself commercially. The give and take of benefits that account for the disproportionate economic gain makes this type of relationship not exploitative

However, there are situations in which commerce can be exploitative. Montesquieu separates commerce into two categories: economic and luxury. These two types of commerce tend to be associated with certain constitutions. "In government by one alone, it is ordinarily founded on luxury, and though it is also founded on real needs, its principal object is to procure... all that serves its arrogance, its delights, and its fancies. In government by many, it is more often founded on economy" (SL XX.4). While it is not impossible for a monarchy to engage in economic commerce, such as the constitutional monarchy of England, a monarchy tends to engage in luxury commerce. The exploitative effects that commerce can cause are mostly, if not entirely, a result of the aspects of luxury commerce. The exploitation is a result of the despot, monarch, or ruling class taking advantage of commerce to satiate their ostentatious desires. Though economic commerce can be influenced in a similar way by the elite to be corrupted into luxury commerce and thus potentially exploitative, there exist aspects of

economic commerce that appear similar to aspects of luxury commerce, but are actually different enough to not be exploitative.

The most visible similarity is in the way that the government can interact to impose restrictions on traders. A government that places regulations on economic commerce does so to improve the overall welfare of commerce, but a ruler or ruling class that confines commerce to mandates that establish a regulation to line their coffers does so at the expense of the nation. This type of commerce and regulation, such as the Colonial commerce of Spain, “does not depend on the industry of the nation, the number of inhabitants, nor the cultivation of the earth. The king of Spain... is in this respect but a very rich individual in a very poor state” (Howse 10). Moreover, the regulations of the ruler or ruling class in a luxury commerce tend to establish monopolies that help garner wealth for those who establish the policies; these monopolies limit trade and traders in a way that is not beneficial to the overall welfare of commerce, but to the overall wealth of the ruler(s),

Due to the potentially exploitative nature of luxury commerce and the possibility of economic commerce transforming into luxury commerce, Montesquieu outlines several rules of commerce that should not be broken lest the commerce turn from one of general advantage to that of an exploitative and/or destructive nature. As previously discussed, the implementation of monopolies through government (in)action is one such occurrence to avoid, for a monopoly limits trade to the degree where it is less advantageous for those forced to trade with the one who holds the monopoly because the monopoly can adjust their price in an uncontrollable manner, a price that is naturally regulated by commercial competition. The lack of accountability associated with a government created monopoly having virtually unlimited power is similar to the reason that a monarch should not participate in commerce. commerce.

If a monarch was to participate in commerce, they would be the most powerful trader there was, with nothing to stop them from being the most successful trader in their nation. The example Montesquieu uses for why rulers should not engage in commerce is found in Theophilus, who burned a ship carrying goods for his wife, telling her “I am the emperor... and you make me a shipmaster. How can the poor people earn a living if we too ply their trade?” (SL XX.19). Montesquieu adds further that no one could stop the monarch from making monopolies and no one could force a monarch to pay his debts. This kind of advantage in commerce that the monarch holds is one of sheer exploitation, for the rules of commerce do not apply, effectively hampering the individual and commerce for the proprietary ventures of the ruler.

Similarly, the nobility of a monarchy should not participate in commerce either, because if the nobility was to participate in commerce, merchants and plebeians would have a harder time buying and selling (SL XX.21). The involvement of the nobility in commerce is one of inherent disadvantage, while the nobility are innately more powerful in a monarchy, they would partake in commerce easier than their merchant/plebian counterpart without providing any real benefits to commerce. While there is a natural advantage for nobles to engage in commerce that can potentially harm the commerce of the lower class, the more important damaging factor is that “It is against the spirit of monarchy for the nobility to engage in commerce. The usage that permitted commerce to the nobility in England is one of the things that most contributed to weakening monarchical government there” (SL XX.21). For a nobility to participate in commerce, the goal of the nobility is more than likely to shift away from that of honor, which is necessary for a monarchy to stay strong.

If the nobility is more focused on partaking in the business of merchants and plebeians, then the structural support to the monarchy’s military power crumbles. The nobility are a group

who live and die for their monarch; “who go to war so that no one will dare to say they did not go; who expect honors when they cannot expect wealth, and when they do not get wealth, console themselves because they have acquired honor” (SL XX.22). If the nobility instead values wealth over honor, as would happen if the nobility engages in commerce, then the strength of the monarchy would fluctuate with the strength of its fortune. This would ultimately be a detriment to the strength of the monarchy, for honor can be held even in times the worst of circumstances, but wealth fluctuates to a greater degree, leaving the kingdom unnecessarily weaker in time turmoil.

The negative effect on commerce from the participation of a monarch and/or the nobility is one that exploits its own people. Unlike the colonial commerce of Spain, which skipped the involvement of its own people, commerce that involves the monarch and/or the nobility diminishes the power of everyone else. This exploitation of the people causes their livelihood to deteriorate in order for the elite to quench their thirst for luxuries. While commerce can be disadvantageous when the monarch or nobility participates, the government as a whole establishing trade companies is supported by Montesquieu. These government created trading companies can then form monopolies that enable the government to reap the benefits of commerce in what initially appears to go against Montesquieu’s stance on monopolies. However, the benefits the government can receive from this sort of establishment outweigh the negatives associated with monopolies when they are created via trading companies. When monarchs and the nobility engage in commerce, it causes a type of exploitation that is harmful to commerce; yet even with this exploitation, most nations continue to benefit from conducting commerce, with the exception of countries like Poland, where luxury commerce is harmful and the nation would be better off not participating in commerce at all.

Poland is a nation whose entire population is under the control of a few lords who possess entire provinces. The lords “oppress the plowmen in order to have a greater quantity of grain to send to foreigners and procure for themselves the things their luxury demands. If Poland had commerce with no nation, its people would be happier” (SL XX.23). The people of Poland would be happier because without the commerce of luxury, the lords would have no reason to oppress them, meaning the people would be able to enjoy more of the grain their work is able to produce. Though Poland would have benefitted from having no commerce with other nations, due to the extent commerce has reached globally and the interests of the elite, such an occurrence would have been highly unlikely.

As previously described, the strengthening of commerce through conquest and navigation has made commerce a global phenomenon that reaches even the farthest corners of the world. Commerce as a general rule may be advantageous, yet the advantage for everyone who participates in commerce varies. For the nation of Poland, commerce exploits the people so that the elite can live a luxurious life, and if the monarch or nobility partake in commerce similar exploitations can occur. Suffice to say, it is the elite who have the most to gain from luxury commerce, but this is not the type of commerce that Montesquieu promotes. Luxury commerce as a whole is detrimental to the nations who participate in it, even if monopolies are avoided. As Montesquieu points out, luxury commerce can weaken the spirit of a monarchy and exploit a nation’s people to the extent that the nation would be better off not participating in commerce with other nations. For these reasons, Montesquieu turns to economic commerce as the procurer of gentle mores and peace.

Unlike luxury commerce, which involves the buying and selling of unnecessary material goods, economic commerce involves the trading of goods that nations and individuals actually

need. Since the two parties involved in economic commerce each gain something they need by trading with the other, they establish a mutual dependency, for as long as both parties need something that the other has to offer and is willing to trade, there is an incentive to continue obtaining those goods through commerce, whereas war would ruin the commercial relationship; potentially causing a nation to lose its access to a commodity it needs. This mutual dependency is why economic commerce, and not luxury commerce, is the type of commerce that naturally leads to peace.

Still, while economic commerce can potentially lead to a mutual dependency that deters the desire for war; there are still differences in how advantageous economic commerce is for a nation. The amount of advantage a nation has in participating in commerce varies based on factors, such as security, location, tolerance, wealth, assets, and morality. For many nations, the benefits of commerce are purely monetary; they seek to increase their fortune through commerce, but for other nations, the benefits of commerce have no real monetary value and are worth commercial disadvantages to obtain.

One such benefit of commerce worth disadvantages via trade is that of security. Security is a large concern for any nation, for a nation without security is susceptible to outside invasion, and a people without security are prone to rebellion from within. Athens maintained its security by its virtue, for individuals were willing to lay down their lives because the city valued the whole over that of the individual. While England maintains its security because its individuals are willing to put in whatever resources are necessary to ensure the nation they live and invest in remains safe. However, some nations lack the population, resources, or military armaments to guarantee their security.

When such a circumstance exists, this nation must ally itself with a stronger nation to obtain the security benefits associated with the alliance. During the era of the Ancients, a small nation may have been conquered or joined to an empire, such as the Persian or Roman Empire, for new trade routes were discovered by conquest. This would tie the nation's security to that of the empire it was a part of, which strengthened the security overall, but gave the nation little power in controlling its security. This relationship is very similar to the relationship between a colony and its mother country, for if the mother country suffers, so too does the colony.

The utilization of commerce makes it unnecessary for a nation to tie its fate to the security of another nation, while still providing the opportunity for a small nation to be protected by a larger one. In the case of Marseilles, it was vital that they had "frugal mores, in order to live always by a commerce that they would the more surely preserve the less it was advantageous to them" (SL XX.5). By having frugal mores, Marseilles minimized their costs to ensure that whomever they traded with could have the best deals; the better the deal, the more likely a nation would continue trading with Marseilles. The preservation of commerce due to incredible deals and the minimal military threat that it poses makes Marseilles a valuable trading partner, giving it the chance to ally itself with powerful nations, like Rome, in order to garner security.

Marseilles succeeded in economic commerce because of the advantages it gave to other commercial traders in order to secure its own commerce. Living by frugal mores is what made Marseilles capable of ensuring the longevity of its economic commerce, but why could Marseilles succeed in maintaining frugal mores where Athens had failed? Athens, which had a powerful maritime empire and all the resources necessary to succeed in economic commerce, did not work to extend its commerce. Despite having all the necessary requirements to succeed, Athens did not have great economic commerce because it was focused on "projects for glory"

(SL XXI.7). All things considered, Athens was in a position where it did not need economic commerce to survive; though Montesquieu points out that Athens would have had greater prosperity had it increased its influence through commerce, their survival was tied to their virtue.

Contrarily, Marseilles was reliant on commerce to survive; without commerce, Marseilles would have fallen. Due to its location (and its assets which will be discussed in greater detail later) Marseilles was reliant on commerce for its subsistence. “Marseilles, a necessary retreat in the midst of a stormy sea, Marseilles, where all the winds, the shoals, and the coastline order ships to put in, was frequented by sea-faring people” (SL XX.5). The sole advantage that Marseilles had was its location. The location of a nation can ultimately decide its commercial success; while other factors can be crucial to the amount of success, without a good location, where commerce can grow with minimal oppression, there is no inception of commerce.

Even though the location is vital for commerce to exist and a good location can be pivotal for the success of the commerce that springs up there, there is not real limitation on what constitutes a viable location. In fact, Montesquieu points out that commerce “sometimes destroyed by conquerors, sometimes hampered by monarchs, wanders across the earth, flees from where it is oppressed, and remains where it is left to breath: it reign today where one used to see only deserted places, seas, and rocks; there where it used to reign are now only deserted places” (SL XXI.5). Commerce can transform even the most barren of locations, like the land Marseilles was built on, into an epicenter of trade.

Though not the ideal circumstances for commerce to begin, commerce finds safe haven in locations previously considered uninhabitable, for those are the locations where no monarch reigns and conquerors care not to travel. It is there, “that violence and harassment have brought forth economic commerce among men who are constrained to hide in marshes, on islands, on the

shoals, and even among dangerous reefs” (SL XX.5). Like Marseilles, the people who engage in commerce in these locations need economic commerce for their subsistence and their security. Commerce has the capability to spring up in a multitude of locations, but the way a location is used and the natural advantages of a location help determine the success that commerce has there.

A nation that used its location masterfully is Montesquieu example Corinth:

Corinth was admirably well situated; it separated two seas, opened and shut the Peloponnesus, and opened and shut Greece. It was a town of the greatest importance in a time when the Greek people were a world, and the Greek towns, nations. It did a greater commerce than Athens, It had one port to receive commodities from Asia; it had another to receive those from Italy; for, as there were great difficulties in going around Cape Malea, where opposing winds meet causing shipwrecks, one preferred to go to Corinth where vessels could even be carried overland from one sea to another. (SL XXI.7)

Corinth’s success in commerce was, in large part, due to their location, specifically, the benefits that ships had in traveling to Corinth instead of venturing around Cape Malea. Like Marseilles, the convenience associated with the location facilitated the arrival of numerous sea-faring people, thus resulting in commerce. However, the enormous success of Corinth was also a result of the various nations who went there for commerce.

In the example Corinth, commerce succeeded because they, at the very least, tolerated other nations enough to allow trade to exist. The importance of a nation being tolerant enough to make way for commerce can also be seen in the example of England, who let their political interests give way to their commercial interests (SL XX.7) as well as Alexander the Great, who removed the religious barriers preventing successful commerce to be brought to the Indies (SL XXI.8). In all three of these examples, commerce succeeded because it was open to as many nations as possible, for (in almost all circumstances) one who engages in commerce benefits most when allowing all nations to participate, and therefore loses many opportunities upon limiting who it trades with.

Prior to Alexander the Great, the Persian Empire did not bring trade to the Indies because their religious beliefs prevented them from even considering maritime commerce. In this case, a self-imposed limitation on commerce hampers the overall success. A nation that is more tolerant will have a greater advantage in commerce, for the nation will be willing to include more nations in its commerce. Contrarily, a nation that is not tolerant, will exclude others from its commerce. The lesson of tolerance extends to other ideologies about commerce that involve precluding trade with other nations without great reason. One such nation that suffers commercially is that of Japan:

The Japanese trade with only two nations, the Chinese and the Dutch. The Chinese earn a thousand percent on sugar and sometimes as much on return commodities. The Dutch make about the same profit. Any nation guided by the maxims of the Japanese will necessarily be deceived. It is competition that puts a just price on goods and establishes the true relations between them. (SL XX.9)

The Japanese lose the benefit of competition when they limit their trade. With more competition vying for the same trade, Japan would be able to accept the lowest prices for buying and the highest prices for selling. For this reason, opening trade to as many nations as possible is vital to see all of the options and useful to have different nations compete to make the best offer. While the general rule is that competition puts a fair price on goods and a nation should not limit with whom it trades, there is an exception “for a poor nation, which willingly abandons the expectation of becoming rich, provided it has secured its sustenance” (SL XX.9). In these circumstances, a poor nation will make a deal to trade with only one nation in order to secure a fixed price that guarantees its survival.

The exception made for poor nations to accept a disadvantaged commerce so that its commerce can survive is a result of the different way commerce affects nations of varying wealth. The wealth-based differences can be seen at four levels: extreme wealth, moderate

wealth, poor wealth, and destitute wealth. A nation that is extremely wealthy and capable of engaging in the commerce easily itself can do so by only supplying commodities produced in its country and by permitting trade only with ships built in its own country (SL XX.8). Though this is not an ideal situation for commerce, if the nation is capable and wealthy enough, it can do so. Still, a wealthy nation has the most to gain from engaging in commerce. Consider Montesquieu's example of Japan:

The excessive quantity of what it can accept produces the excess of what it can send out: things will be in equilibrium as if imports and exports were moderate, and besides, this kind of inflation will produce a thousand advantages for the state; there will be more consumption, more things on which the arts can be exercised, more men employed, more means of acquiring power... It is hard when a country does not have superfluous things, but it is the nature of commerce to make superfluous things useful and useful ones necessary. (SL XX.23).

With an immense amount of wealth comes an immense amount of opportunities, all of which favor the wealthier nation. These advantages do not extend to a moderately wealth nation, but, like a wealthy nation, a nation of moderate wealth continues to advantage most from extending its commerce as far as possible and including as many nations as possible. A wealthy nation can afford to limit its trade to a degree that a nation of moderate wealth can not. The rule of thumb that is to be applied to nations of moderate wealth is the same rule that Montesquieu applies to Spain: "it is suitable for it to put the fewest obstacles in the way of commerce that its policy can permit" (SL XXI.23). The best example of policy is that of England who always puts its commercial interests before its political ones. Still, this is not something that all nations do, and the values associated with religion and politics are not to be discounted, but if the nation seeks to act in the best interest of its commerce, it will obstruct it as little as possible.

Of course, the minimal obstruction of commerce is targeted to nations who aim to maximize their profits, such as wealthy and moderately wealthy nations. However, the goal of a poor nation differs from that of their wealthier counterparts because they must first obtain the

goods necessary for their survival; then, and only then, does maximizing profits become a reality. Therefore, where it is imperative for a wealthier nation to leave commerce unobstructed, a poor nation may find the best option to be one that disadvantages it commercially, such as creating an agreement to only trade with one nation “on the pretext that it will take all of it at a certain price...many kings of the Indies have similar contracts with the Dutch for spices” (SL XX.9). While the agreement is detrimental to their commerce as a whole, it guarantees their survival.

In the case of a poor nation, it may be most beneficial to restrict trade to an extreme degree, but a nation so destitute that it cannot even benefit from a disadvantageous agreement of commerce may be better off not engaging in commerce at all. This nation will have little to zero access to the moveable goods of other nations and very little access to its own as well. Moreover, its land will be owned not by its citizens, but by foreigners. Having a desperate need for everything with the ability to gain nothing, this nation would only disadvantage itself by engaging in commerce and would be better off trading with no nation (SL XX.23). Therefore, “it is not the nations who need nothing that lose by carrying commerce; it is those who need everything. It is not the peoples who have enough among themselves but those who have nothing at home who find it advantageous to trade with no one” (SL XX.23).

Presumably, the relationship between wealth and commerce should be similar to the relationship between assets and commerce, but the reality of all too many situations has made this to not be true. Theoretically, as with wealth, the more valuable assets that a nation possesses, the more advantages it should have in commerce, which would be true if the disposition of the people who accessed the commodities was universal. However, due to variation in people’s disposition as a result of the assets they possess those whom nature has given plenty gain less

from commerce compared to those who nature has given little. This distinction can be seen most accurately by the South and North people of Europe. “The first have all sorts of the comforts of life and few needs; the second have many needs and few of the comforts of life. To the former, nature had given much, and they ask but little of it; to the others nature gives little, and they ask much of it” (SL XXI.3).

The South which possesses many of the resources necessary to secure the wealthiest of lifestyles does not utilize the resources it has efficiently, whereas the North possesses little and work incredibly hard with the resources they have in order to scrounge up a living. The increased efficiency that the North has from participating in commerce stems from their reliance on commerce in order to survive. They worked hard to turn what few resources they possessed into successful economic commerce. In fact, economic commerce tends to occur most for those who have no assets. It is important to distinguish no assets from the possession of nothing, for the possession of nothing (or almost nothing) is a destitute state of wealth that does not benefit from commerce.

A major difference between destitution and the possession of little to no assets is that those who are destitute are not capable of making ends meet because even their labor does not provide for themselves. Oftentimes, this can occur from the land they work being owned by someone else, meaning they receive a meager portion of the labor they conduct. Another such circumstance can be seen in a despotic state, where all labor is subject to the whim of the despot, and therefore no amount of labor will raise the individual from poverty. Similarly, but significantly different, the lack of assets does not remove the potential gain from an individual’s hard work; thus the more effort and diligence that an individual puts in, the more they can garner from the world around them.

Individuals who possess no assets still possess their liberty and their land (or the land they work on is owned by the nation they work for and not foreigners). On the other hand, individuals who possess nothing lack the liberty necessary for their labor to significantly factor into their accumulation of wealth. It is this distinction between those without assets and those who are destitute that classifies the two types of poor peoples:

those that the harshness of the government has rendered such; and these are incapable of hardly any virtue, because their poverty is part of their servitude; the others are only poor for having disdained, or not having known the commodities of life; and these can do great things, for their poverty is part of their liberty. (SL XX.3).

Those who are poor, yet retain their liberty, find a great advantage in economic commerce, which is why Marseilles turned to economic commerce. Its people, having seen the barrenness of its territory and having a strong will to work hard, did what they had to in order to live. “[I]n order to replace that which nature refused them... they drew their livelihood from the whole universe” (SL XX.5).

For nations, the success of commerce is a result of the progress that commerce has made throughout history. The progress of which is one that occurred in conjunction with the progress of war. Montesquieu expresses a strong belief that commerce has surpassed war in terms of international relations; that nations should conduct commerce with each other for it is more advantageous than attempting to destroy the each other through military conquest.

First of all he explains how progress in military engineering has made conquest nearly impossible. He also exposes how the moral evolution in Europe means that conquest is no longer economically satisfying. Montesquieu states that the *jus gentium* has changes since the time of the Roman Empire and that pillages and massacres among European countries are no longer morally acceptable. This moral impossibility of pillage has made conquest too expensive and the spoils too meagre for it to be a worthwhile practice. (Long 92).

The concern of morality is the final concern that determines the degree of advantage a state has in participating in commerce. Contemplating the importance of morality considers the parallel

role that war and commerce have had with each other in history. As war becomes a less viable method of participation in the international arena, either through shifts in morals or advancing military engineering, more states turn to commerce as their means of having an international impact, thus increasing the strength and extent of commerce.

One could say that commerce has found its niche with gentle mores, or the opposite, but the truth remains that gentle mores and commerce are almost always found together (SL XX.1). Since commerce exposes different states to various mores and manners, it corrupts pure mores and flees from destructive prejudices, for it does not thrive when one set of values maligns another that it is supposed to interact with through trade. The exposure of different mores softens the mores of all who partake in commerce, deterring war by providing an alternative arena.

In discussing commerce, Montesquieu aptly points out that he is “dragged along by a torrent” (SL XX.1), for the amount of critical thinking that could go into the topic, commerce, is beyond the scope of *The Spirit of the Laws*; beyond the scope of any one piece of writing. The effect of commerce is one that Montesquieu argues naturally leads to peace, though it does not eliminate warfare. Rather, commerce has the effect of making warfare less appealing, for the benefits that a nation can obtain through commerce exceed those it could take through conquest. For powerful nations, this is a deterrent of war, helping prevent wars based on economic interests; for other nations, this is a way to establish mutual dependency, ensuring both states can gain without the need for destruction. Through these exchanges, commerce spreads the mores throughout the various nations and there they are compared, curing destructive prejudices and preserving gentle mores (SL XX.1), causing not the eradication of war, but an elimination of reasons for war to exist.

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