



INTRODUCTION

Fortunately for all of us, the Cold War ended not with a bang but with a whimper. It is surprising, however, that its cessation inspired so little elation. Of course, there was a moment of euphoria and rejoicing when the Berlin Wall quite suddenly ceased to be a barrier. It seemed a miracle, and in a sense it was. But that moment quickly passed; and where one might have expected opinion leaders in the West to celebrate what was, after all, an astonishing and historically unprecedented victory, involving the utter defeat and ultimate dissolution of a powerful and threatening adversary in the absence of a major war, one encountered at best a cautious optimism and at worst a sense of resignation.¹ It was as if liberal democrats everywhere mourned the enemy they had known and were in fear of an enemy who had not yet appeared.

The French worried about the consequences of German reunification; the Germans fretted about its costs. In Czechoslovakia, the Velvet Revolution was followed by the Velvet Divorce. The revival of ancient religious and ethnic hatreds gave rise to armed struggle within and between some of the successor states to the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Throughout Eastern Europe, people were less inclined to speak of revolution than of transition; and in many a country, the old communists with a name change and a face-lift were soon returned to power by a newly liberated electorate nostalgic for a past offering in predictability what it had denied in the way of opportunity. Then, on the first occasion that presented itself, the French, the Germans, the Belgians, and many others within a Western Europe that had once been liberated from fascism by the United States and that had later been protected from communism by that same power turned on their former benefactor and set out to put as much distance as possible between themselves and that country, denouncing its policies, demonizing its leaders, and venting great rancor against its people and their way of life.

If, in and soon after 1989, the prevailing mood was nonetheless one of relief, it was not unmixed with sadness, discontent, and a measure of world-weariness. When Francis Fukuyama announced “the end of history” and suggested that we may have entered the era of Nietzsche’s “last man,” he struck a nerve and caused a sensation—not just in the United States, but in France and in the rest of Europe as well.² A similar spirit pervaded Samuel P. Huntington’s quite different—one might even say, contrarian—observations concerning the likelihood that there would be a great “clash of civilizations,” wherein, as critics noted, there was more than a hint of the profound cultural pessimism that once suffused Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*.³

When Ned Lebow and Janice Stein informed their fellow political scientists that “we all lost the Cold War,”⁴ their claim was not immediately dismissed as preposterous. When Tony Judt denounced John Lewis Gaddis for focusing narrowly on grand strategy in a book charting the history of the Cold War, sneering that Gaddis had treated “the ‘third world’ as a sideshow, albeit one in which hundreds of thousands of performers got killed,”⁵ no one from among his fellow historians stepped forward to point out that, from the perspective of grand strategy, the proxy wars that occurred within the Third World really were a sideshow, and no one bothered to ask whether Professor Judt knew of a comparable epic struggle between rival coalitions lasting more than four decades in which the collateral damage had been less.⁶ In keeping with the prevailing mood, triumphalism was also notably absent from the great outpouring of literature on liberal democracy and its prospects that appeared in the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse.⁷

There was also evidence of growing popular disaffection. In 2004, when a pollster named Scott Rasmussen asked Americans whether their country was “generally fair and decent,” roughly a quarter of those planning to vote in the presidential election disagreed; and, when the Pew Trust asked whether American “wrongdoing” might have “motivated” the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, a similar proportion of those who responded were persuaded that this might, indeed, have been the case. Even more to the point, polls taken that year revealed that something like a quarter of the American population doubted that the world would be better off if other nations were more like their own.⁸ In February and March 2008, when the wife of a presidential aspirant repeatedly asserted in her stump speech that Americans are “cynical” and “mean” and have “broken souls” and that the lives “that most people are living” have “gotten progressively worse since I was a little girl,” she caught the sour mood of this segment of the American electorate.⁹

In Europe, there have also been indications of the emergence of a deep sense of popular malaise. In February 2002, a Convention on the Future of Europe was

convened to great acclaim under the chairmanship of former French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing to draft a constitutional frame for the European Union. The following year a document, more than 450 pages in length, was placed before the public; and in June 2004, an amended version of the original draft was presented to the union's member nations for ratification. A year later, however, when the first referenda were held, despite the fact that the political class throughout the European continent was virtually unanimous in enthusiastic support for the constitutional project, the ordinary people of France and the United Provinces, founding members of the Common Market and leading members of the European Union, promptly and decisively rejected the proposal.

There is something altogether odd and not a little unsettling about these developments, for they leave us wondering where to turn. That the chattering classes should be inclined to sneer is hardly a matter needing extended comment: sneering is the coin in which the modern intellectual trades. But world-weariness and profound popular disaffection are something else again. Perhaps, however, the sobriety with which statesmen, peoples, and scholars have greeted liberal democracy's sudden and unexpected achievement of a seemingly unchallenged hegemony is entirely appropriate. After all, this sobriety jibes well with a conviction which informed the establishment of the modern world's first unequivocally liberal, undeniably republican regime: that an experiment of doubtful resolution had then been set in train. Perhaps, Americans and their European cousins can still echo the words that George Washington wrote to the governors of America's states in early June 1783 on the eve of his retirement as general of the armies—that "it is yet to be decided whether the [American] Revolution must ultimately be considered as a blessing or a curse: a blessing or a curse, not to the present age alone, for with our fate will the destiny of unborn Millions be involved."¹⁰ If there is even a hint of justification for our strangely melancholy response to a set of events that seem, finally, to have made the world safe for democracy, it is worth pondering anew whether liberal republicanism, for all its many obvious virtues, displays certain inherent defects as well.

For reflections of such a sort, there may be no occasion more appropriate than the interval between the 250th anniversary of the death of Charles-Louis de Secondat, baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu, and the 150th anniversary of the death of his disciple Alexis de Tocqueville, when this volume was brought to completion. The latter needs no introduction. The pertinence of his work to the study of modern liberal democracy is well-known, and the same claim can arguably be made for Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose contributions to democratic theory and to the study of bourgeois society will be discussed in this volume as

well. The importance of their teacher Montesquieu may, however, require a brief word of explanation.

That the author of *The Spirit of Laws*, which first appeared in 1748, was a great man, graced with a comprehensive vision of the political setting within which liberal republicanism first emerged, was once a fact well-known. In *The Federalist*, James Madison called him an “oracle,” and both Madison and Alexander Hamilton spoke of him as “the celebrated Montesquieu.”¹¹ They knew what subsequent scholarship has shown to be true: that no political writer was more often cited and none was thought to be of greater authority in the era of American constitution-making.¹² They knew, moreover, that in England and on the continent of Europe, he was thought to be of similar stature. Indeed, having carefully read his *Spirit of Laws* themselves, they knew why, throughout the Christian West, he was held in such regard.

If Montesquieu was so often consulted and cited by their contemporaries, it was largely because, in *The Spirit of Laws*, he had announced his discovery, on the very doorstep of his native France, of a new form of government more conducive to liberty and graced with greater staying power than any polity theretofore even imagined. As Madison put it: “The British constitution was to Montesquieu, what Homer has been to the didactic writers on epic poetry. As the latter have considered the work of the immortal Bard, as the perfect model from which the principles and rules of the epic art were to be drawn, and by which all similar works were to be judged; so this great political critic appears to have viewed the constitution of England, as the standard, or to use his own expression, as the mirror of political liberty; and to have delivered in the form of elementary truths, the several characteristic principles of that particular system.”¹³ Students of the form of political liberty peculiar to modern republics may still have something to learn from considering what Montesquieu had to say a quarter of a millennium ago concerning the constitution of England—for, James Madison to the contrary notwithstanding, Montesquieu did not profess for “the particular government of England” an “admiration bordering on idolatry.”¹⁴ He was, in fact, a critic as well as an admirer, as sensitive to the imperfections inherent in the English form of government as he was to its many virtues; and, as we shall in due course see, the defects he discerned in that polity and the propensities that arise therefrom are pertinent to understanding the political psychology of all modern republics and to tracing the sources of our present discontents.

If, then, we wish to understand whither we are tending, we would be well-advised to reacquaint ourselves with a forgotten form of political science and to read with care Montesquieu and then those, such as Rousseau and Tocqueville, who closely followed his lead and expanded in crucial regards upon what he had

to say. This is, however, easier said than done. For Montesquieu, in particular, wrote in a time now largely forgotten and unfamiliar, and he couched his arguments with an eye to an immediate public that has long since disappeared. Moreover, he lived in an age of censorship, and he composed his works in conformity with unwritten rules of discretion, intimating that which could not with profit openly be said. It would be patronizing for us to suppose him a “man of his time,” condemned to think as his contemporaries thought; and it would be a grave error as well, for it would deprive us of the capacity to appreciate fully the force and the originality of what he had to say. But it is nonetheless true that to make himself understood Montesquieu had to make use of the vocabulary and the idioms spoken by his compatriots and redeploy them in a fashion suited to conveying what was novel in his reflections. In consequence, the challenge we face if we are to understand his thinking is not just intellectual, it is also literary, and it is unavoidably historical. One might even call our task archaeological. Before we can hope to be able to return to our own age; to rethink our situation in light of the penetrating analysis offered by Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Tocqueville; and to recognize it for what it is for the first time, we must undertake a journey into the past, to Montesquieu’s day and, then, to that of his greatest successors, . . . in search of treasure that is buried there.

Journeys of this kind, whether through space or time, can be a liberation. Archaeologists of the ordinary sort may find it necessary to pack a great deal of luggage and equipment. Intellectual archaeologists generally do the opposite. As they proceed, they tend to lose the baggage that they have brought with them—and not to mind a bit. They find themselves jettisoning preconceptions, abandoning prejudices, and setting aside, at least for the length of the ride, their current pressing, confining concerns. Freed from the burden of present-mindedness and from the anxieties to which it gives rise, they enter imaginatively into ways of thinking that are decidedly foreign; and in the process, more often than not, they open themselves to possibilities that they had never before even contemplated, and they secure for themselves a vantage point from which to view their own world. Such was the experience of Voltaire and of Montesquieu when they journeyed through space to England in the late 1720s; such was the experience of Rousseau when he sojourned in Paris in the late 1740s and the 1750s; and such was the experience of Tocqueville when he traveled with Gustave de Beaumont through Jacksonian America in the early 1830s. Moreover, when Montesquieu journeyed through time and gave himself over to Homer and Vergil; to Plato and Aristotle; to Herodotus and Thucydides; to Plutarch, Polybius, and Livy; and to Montaigne, Hobbes, Pascal, Locke, Mandeville, and a great many others, he had much the same experience—not just once, but repeatedly—as

did Rousseau when he first read Plutarch and first studied Montesquieu's *Spirit of Laws*, and Tocqueville also, when on a daily basis he entered into conversation with Pascal, Montesquieu, and Rousseau. Such, I hope, will be the experience of those who are led by this work to view the world, at least for a fleeting moment, through the eyes of Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Tocqueville.

Our intellectual odyssey we will begin, as is only proper, at the beginning—some three hundred years ago, at the moment when the world's first fully modern, first fully commercial republic first made its presence felt in the world and first demonstrated its viability in the sphere where aspiring polities meet their first, most decisive, and most grueling test—on the field of the sword. Then, after briefly considering the effect on the young Voltaire and on his slightly older contemporary Montesquieu of Great Britain's victories over France in the War of the Spanish Succession, we will set out on our way, as those two young men did on theirs. Our journey we will make in stages, pausing at discrete intervals to dig deeply into the thinking of Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Tocqueville.

In the case of Montesquieu, to whom I have devoted a separate volume designed to provide a full account of his thinking concerning modernity, we will start by glancing at his provocative analysis of the novel character of modern geopolitics and of the peculiar place occupied within that system by Great Britain. Then, we will take up his regime typology—above all else, his description of the political psychology regnant within the various and strikingly different forms of government that existed in ancient and modern times and his account of the circumstances, practices, laws, and policies that sustain and subvert each polity—and, with an eye to the account of fallen man in Pascal's *Pensées* and to that of man in general in Montaigne's *Essays* and in Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, we will tease out the implications of Montesquieu's regime typology for the virtues, the vices, and the long-term prospects of Great Britain and of the colonies it established on the North American continent. Our ruminations on Montesquieu we will then conclude with a glance at his penetrating and prescient assessment of the trajectory that European and world history were likely to take.

When we have finished this, we will pause briefly to consider Montesquieu's influence on his contemporaries. Then, we will turn to his greatest admirer and most astute critic, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and we will ponder the significance of the profound debt the latter owed his predecessor's analysis of the political psychology of the modern liberal republic. In this light, we will consider the substance of Rousseau's attack on the Enlightenment, his contention that progress in the sciences and the arts is likely to corrupt human beings and intensify their misery, and his suggestion that bourgeois society and popular enlightenment

pose a threat to intellectual integrity and freedom. Then, we will examine in detail the foundations of the savage critique he directed on other grounds at the commercial societies emerging in his time and weigh the eloquent argument that he made on behalf of intense civic engagement.

It is against this background that we will undertake the last stage of our journey—the one that will bring us home. Therein we will consider Tocqueville's application of the psychological insights of Pascal, the political science of Montesquieu and Rousseau, and that of Aristotle to the strange new world that emerged in the wake of the American and French revolutions. Here, once again, our focus will be first and foremost psychological, and we will examine the cast of mind promoted by the democratic social condition, the new species of despotism to which that condition gives rise, and the salutary remedies applied in the America that Tocqueville visited in the early 1830s. Then and only then will we return to our own time and, in light of what we have learned from Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Tocqueville, trace the trajectory of France, the European Union, and the United States; ponder whether the world's modern republics are on the right course; and face up to what must be done if we are to recover from the profound sense of malaise to which we are now prone.