ORIENTAL DESPOTISM AND EUROPEAN ORIENTALISM:
BOTERO TO MONTESQUIEU

JOAN-PAU RUBIÉS
London School of Economics and Political Science

ABSTRACT

The issue of how European images of the East were formed, used, and contested is far from simple. The concept of oriental despotism allowed early-modern Europeans to distinguish themselves from the most powerful and impressive non-European civilizations of the Ottoman Middle East, Persia, India, and China on grounds which were neither fundamentally religious nor linked to sheer scientific and technological progress, but political and moral. However, it would be incorrect to treat this as a pure European fantasy based on the uncritical application of a category inherited from Aristotle, because both the concept and its range of application were often hotly contested. By assessing the way travel accounts helped transform the concept from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, this article argues that oriental despotism was not a mental scheme that blinded Europeans to the perception of the true Orient, but rather a compelling tool for interpreting information gathered about the Orient, one which served a common intellectual purpose despite important differences of opinion in Europe about the nature of royal power.

True and legitimate Government is necessarily limited... the observance of laws, the preservation of liberty and the love of one's country are the fertile sources of all great things and of all fine actions.

Diderot, Encyclopédie

Oriental Despotism as a European Fantasy

Few examples within the history of ideas seem as likely to fit within the controversial “orientalist” thesis popular in post-colonial historiography as the concept of “oriental despotism,” especially as it was famously formulated by Montesquieu (albeit ultimately on the basis of Aristotle) as central to the political thought of the Enlightenment. The historical influence of the concept which Montesquieu crystallized in the Esprit des lois needs little argument, since (as Franco Venturi showed) it was widely discussed within the Enlightenment, and, for example, cast its shadow upon the early justification and criticism of the British conquest...
of India. The case for treating the European image of Asian despotism as a pure fantasy, made by writers like Alain Grossrichard in his *Structure du sérail* (1979), is plausible enough, as it is rooted in contemporary sources. As he notes, it was Voltaire who, reacting against Montesquieu, wrote of despotic governments that “it is quite wrong that such a government exists and, it seems too, quite wrong to think that it could ever exist,” placing the issue of fictionalization at the heart of the criticism of European images of Asia. However, recent discussions of “orientalism,” supported by an increasing body of historically-informed scholarship (contrasting with the largely ideological emphasis of the original debate), have made it clear that the issue of how European images of the East were formed, used, and contested is far from simple. Whilst Voltaire would seem to justify, at least in part, the critical emphasis of later writers like Edward Said (whose “Foucaultian” perspective appears in retrospect to be rather “Voltaireian”), in fact, I would argue, the history of the concept of oriental despotism is still in need of reassessment.

For the sake of clarity, the “orientalist” thesis can be broken down into two propositions, which I will illustrate with reference to our case:

First, and above all, “orientalism” is a pseudo-science. European discourses about “the East,” and especially those concerned with such sweeping concepts as “oriental despotism,” did not respond to a desire to understand Eastern realities. They were mainly concerned with European issues and debates. For example, one may argue that it was mainly because the monarchy of France under Louis XIV was seen as a threat to the liberty of its subjects and its neighbours that “absolute monarchy” became a system of “despotism” in the writings of Huguenot émigrés and other critics of arbitrary power in the late 1680s and 1690s (the actual noun “despotism” was coined by Pierre Bayle at the turn of the eighteenth century, although the use of the adjective “despotic” to describe a particular kind of government had been widespread in the seventeenth century). For a writer like Montesquieu, then, heir to the internal opposition to the regime of Louis XIV after the disastrous

---

War of Spanish Succession, to elaborate the concept of oriental despotism served a purpose within a purely domestic context: it allowed him to claim that a monarchy could only be beneficial and honorable if it was kept within the constitutional limits of the European tradition. The figure of the oriental despot was in fact necessary in order to persuade Montesquieu’s readers into accepting his attempt to resuscitate a kind of mixed monarchy for France, in an age when an aristocratic or democratic republic (Montesquieu believed) was no longer possible. Following this logic, it was also largely to defend the monarchy of Louis XIV that Voltaire reacted against Montesquieu’s concept, not merely by insisting that the kingdom of France was unlike the Ottoman empire (which Montesquieu would have in principle granted), but more radically—and covering all possibilities—that neither France nor the Ottoman state could ever be described as despotisms, because that kind of political system did not exist. In other words, this was a European debate about monarchy in which the East was only present rhetorically.

Second, “orientalism” is also about the way negative representations of “others” serve political agendas. The representation of the East as despotic (or, alternatively, of small tribes elsewhere in the world as “primitive” and “savage”) was not innocent: it supported claims of European superiority and eventually dominion. Thus, historically, it helped support colonial imperialism, like the idea that since the Mughal emperor was “a despot,” and since “there was no private property in India,” the English East India Company could legitimately seek to take over (by treaty and by some use of force) the revenues of Bengal. The concept of oriental despotism is especially relevant in that it allowed Europeans to proclaim their superiority against the most powerful and impressive non-European civilizations of the Ottoman Middle East, Persia, India, and above all China, on grounds which were neither fundamentally religious nor linked to sheer scientific and technological progress, but political and moral. In other words, it allowed Europeans to create new claims to superiority in a terrain in which Eastern civilizations, especially China as witnessed from Marco Polo to the Jesuit missionaries of the seventeenth century, had previously appealed to European ideals of power, prosperity, order, and justice.

Obviously, these two propositions about “orientalism” are problematic.

---

To begin with, they seem contradictory: if the European writer was mainly concerned with interpreting European realities, like the constitution of France, he could hardly fine-tune the rhetoric or the political science which were useful for the promotion of empire. Were European images of the East such as the idea of despotic regimes “orientalist” because of an underlying imperialist impulse, or because they were more concerned with European debates than with Asian realities? A colonial administrator in British India might of course echo Montesquieu’s analysis of Asian despotism, but Montesquieu was not himself concerned with European conquests in India. To solve this dichotomy, we would need to argue that whilst the denigration of the East could simultaneously serve an immediate intellectual agenda in Europe, and in a separate context legitimize a colonial policy, the crucial point is that it was essentially a European fantasy.

Was it, however, a fantasy? I do not believe that we can as historians skip the issue, however uncomfortable. The pervasiveness of the idea of despotic rule, its appearance in a variety of contexts, suggests a profound logic which must respond to more than the sheer continuity of Aristotle’s or any other writer’s influence. At one level, there was an early-modern intellectual context which made the concept highly relevant. Hence the starting point must be recognizing the remarkable consensus in Europe about the desirability that monarchical power be kept within legal limits, even if there was a great deal of disagreement as to which precisely those limits should be. From this perspective, more important than the history of a particular “vocabulary” about despotism is the uses to which the concept was put to, in a variety of contexts; in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the fundamental concern with setting limits to royal power often appears under the guise of criticism of “tyrannical” or “absolute” monarchical power (variations in vocabulary may of course involve subtle alterations in meaning which deserve attention). A wider issue is the extent to which European concerns about the nature of monarchy were actually affected by observation of non-European cultures, and by colonial experiences. This, in turn, requires exploring the relationship between the arguments of political writers and the sources, theoretical and empirical, that they used. In the case of Montesquieu, for example, the seventeenth-century travel writers who largely informed his thought—writers like François Bernier—are no less relevant than Aristotle or Bodin.

It will be my argument in this article that uncovering the history of the idea of despotism, and its application to Asian monarchies, requires
going beyond a mere analysis of European political thought and assessing also how different kinds of sources, empirical and theoretical, may have related to different kinds of aims. Discussing the extent to which oriental despotism was anything other than a European fantasy in particular requires tackling the relation between the history of political thought, on the one hand, and the history of travel writing, on the other. My argument will be that whilst it is true that much of what was written about the despotism of oriental monarchies was ill-informed and caught within an intra-European debate, and whilst much was also open to political manipulation, there is more to the story than that. I will contend, first, that Europeans were often genuinely concerned with understanding the East, for practical and for intellectual reasons; second, that they developed largely empirical methods to do so, and that the intense interaction between direct observation and conceptual development is the key to the emergence of an early-modern discourse on non-Europeans; third, and as a consequence, that concepts such as the one of “oriental despotism” were not mental schemes that blinded Europeans to the perception of the true Orient, but rather, compelling tools for interpreting the information gathered about the Orient. Thus the point is not that the Ottoman, Persian, Mughal, and Chinese states described by Europeans in this period were despotisms, but rather that it made sense to define them as such, that the definition was not always, nor even primarily, arbitrary. As a corollary, what is most important about the concept is not the exact formulation given by Montesquieu or any other writer, but rather the existence of a contemporary debate. My plan here is to elucidate not so much how Europeans in the East formed their primary views of Asian regimes as to examine the interaction

---

6 R. Koebner’s classic article, “Despot and Despotism: Vicissitudes of a Political Term,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 14 (1951): 275-302, can stand as an example of an effort of historical reconstruction which, while in many ways still fundamental, by focusing on political writers and their use of the concept of despotism, leaves quite a few gaps. The same can be said of Melvin Richter’s otherwise excellent article, “Despotism,” in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (1973), 2:1-18. Neither looked at travel literature, neglecting figures like Botero and Bernier, who are central to my story. For a fuller perspective, however, see Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Entzaubrung Asiens. Europa und die asiatischen Reiche im 18. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1996), 271-309.

7 In this respect, I must disagree with Patricia Springborg’s contention that theories of oriental despotism grew up out of a “profound ignorance about oriental states” as well as “certain racist attitudes inherited from Aristotle” (Western Republicanism and the Oriental Prince [Austin, TX, 1992], 3). Not only was the use of the concept often based on fresh attempts to interpret observed political realities, but it also had little to do with racial theories.
between the role of such travelers’ descriptions and the debate about despotism in Europe. I will begin with a brief discussion of key definitions of despotism, from Aristotle to Montesquieu, seeking to clarify what seems central to the concept, and identifying shades of meaning and variations according the changing concerns of different authors, especially in relation to the crucial debate about the limits of royal power in the monarchy of France. In effect, the ground for defining “oriental despotism” shifted throughout the early modern period and accompanied the evolution of European debates (in a variety of contexts) about which were the best political regimes. I shall afterwards discuss the application of the concept to Asian monarchies in particular, determining the relationship between empirical sources and European political concerns through a number of distinct “moments” in the crucial period of crystallization of the concept between 1580 and 1750. It was the Counter Reformation armchair cosmographer Giovanni Botero, I shall argue, who in the light of a wide variety of Renaissance travel accounts, made the crucial move of generalizing the Aristotelian concept of an Asian type of regime to the new realities encountered by Europeans in the sixteenth century. It then took a number of educated travel writers like François Bernier, whose highly influential account of Mughal India deserves close attention, to develop a sophisticated analysis of oriental monarchies on the basis of the fundamental opposition between Asian and European regimes. When Montesquieu made his case on strictly theoretical grounds, he was bringing to fruition this previous literature in the new circumstances of the relative decline of the absolutist France of Louis XIV and his successors against the mixed (or “republican”) monarchy of post-1688 Britain. Not only was his approach dependent on the existence of a considerable body of travel literature, which supported, and even inspired, his arguments, but, as I will suggest in a final section discussing the colonial aftermath to Montesquieu’s formulation, opposition to his conclusions often also took the form of further empirical, “orientalist” research, such as that conducted by Anquetil-Duperron. As a matter of fact, the issue of “orientalism,” defined as a self-interested (even if perhaps unconscious) misrepresentation, was recognized as a problem within the Enlightenment. I shall conclude by arguing that to the extent that there was a process of fictionalization

---

8 Hence the growth in importance of the concept of despotism is related to how concepts of monarchy, sovereignty, republicanism, and the mixed constitution changed from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries.
from Aristotle to the Enlightenment, it was one that required the con-
course not only of political speculators, but also of intelligent observers
and critical historians, and that, in effect, the history of the concept of
despotism can only be written by taking account of this empirical dimen-
sion. That the concept was highly appealing to those most intimately
concerned to understand political differences between Europe and Asia
can be shown by considering by way of epilogue the willingness of some
eighteenth-century oriental observers to attack it.

The Definition of Despotic Government from Aristotle to the Enlightenment

Aristotle’s definition (and, possibly, invention) of despotism as a pecu-
liar form of monarchy is of course crucial to the history of the con-
cept. Not only did he distinguish despotism from mere tyranny, but also
located it within an “oriental” (Persian) tradition in opposition to Greek
European norms, on the basis of the peculiar nature of the peoples of
Asia:

There is another sort of monarchy, not uncommon among foreigners, which nearly
resembles tyranny, but is both legal and hereditary. For foreigners, being more
servile in temperament than Hellenes, and Asians than Europeans, do not rebel
against a despotic government. Such kingships have the nature of tyrannies because
the people are by nature slaves, but there is no danger of their being overthrown,
for they are hereditary and legal.9

This defines despotism as a legal, hereditary regime which otherwise
has the characteristics of a tyranny, given that the power of the king
is absolute and the subjects are like slaves. It is unlike a tyranny in that
it does not involve illegal rule over involuntary subjects (thus Aristotle’s
despot can rely on his own people to form a guard and does not need
to rely on foreign mercenaries). Despite the many transformations that
the concept will undergo, the crucial point—still apparent in Montesquieu’s
classic analysis—is that despotism is systematic, not circumstantial as
tyranny can be: tyranny (in a strict sense of the word) relates to rule
against the law, or abuse of power, and implies the corruption of a sys-
tem by a particular ruler who, against the will of his subjects, puts his
own interests and passions above the pursuit of the common good (even
if this ruler might cynically justify arbitrary rule in the name of the
common good). Despotism, by contrast, indicates an established system

of arbitrary rule, legal insofar as laws do exist, often accepted by the people at large as legitimate, which relates to the nature of the people and often the climate, and which, in the more elaborate analysis of writers like Montesquieu, affects (usually negatively) the civilization and economy of a kingdom or empire. In other words, the despot is not perverting a system of rule, but simply acts as he is supposed to given the servile nature of the people.

Although writers from Aristotle to Montesquieu were primarily thinking of oriental examples, in the literature of the early modern period despotism was not necessarily oriental, nor of course “Muslim”: it could be African or American, gentile and even Christian (as in Russia and Ethiopia). Nonetheless, the tradition of attributing to Asians, unlike Europeans, a servile nature, seems to have been pervasive, especially amongst classically-inspired writers: Aristotle’s perception, for example, was echoed by William of Malmesbury in the twelfth century, Machiavelli in the sixteenth, and Montesquieu in the eighteenth. It was thus a concept associated intimately with the identity of Europe as having a distinct political tradition, which “naturalistic” arguments based on climate, when employed, only reinforced, by implying some kind of inevitability. Thus, as the Anglo-Norman historian William of Malmesbury wrote c.1120 when discussing the first crusade:

The Persian sultan [of the Seljuc dynasty], a title equivalent to Augustus among the Romans, is commander of all the Saracens, and of the whole East. I imagine that this empire has continued for so long and still increases because the people are unwarlike, and being deficient in active blood, know not how to cast off slavery when once admitted.... But the western nations, bold and fierce, disdain long-continued subjugation to any people whatever, often delivering themselves of servitude and imposing it on others.11

The emphasis on a distinctive European tradition of politics is also apparent in Machiavelli’s analysis of monarchical regimes in The Prince.
Here the humanist writer did not go back to Aristotle’s concept of despotism, but maintained the basic distinction between a regime where subjects are free, and another where they are the king’s slaves:

All principalities known to history have been ruled in one of two ways: either by one ruler, who is helped to govern the kingdom by others who are in reality his servants, acting as ministers through his grace and favour; or else by a ruler and barons who hold the rank by hereditary right. ... In states governed by a ruler and his servants, the ruler has more authority, because throughout the country there is no one else who is recognized as a lord. ... Contemporary examples of these two types of government are the Turkish sultan and the king of France. The whole Turkish kingdom is governed by one ruler, the others all being his servants ... but the king of France is placed amidst a great number of hereditary lords. ... 12

Machiavelli’s distinction, which was aimed at explaining why it was more difficult to conquer an administrative monarchy of the Turkish type, but easier to hold once conquered, contrasted France, the most prominent heir of a pre-Roman tradition of European liberty, with the Ottoman state as the modern archetype of an Asian monarchy (a type which also included ancient Persia). 13 Elsewhere Machiavelli made it clear that what made the French kingdom secure and stable was the subjection of royal power to public laws. 14 Machiavelli’s focus on France and the Ottoman empire as modern archetypes inaugurated a highly influential tradition, and indeed the importance of the realities of these two states in shaping the debate must be acknowledged, not only on empirical grounds, but also lest we assume that their peculiar institutions and trajectories can really stand as normative for “Europe” and “Asia.”

In fact, one important observation here is the existence of varying emphases in the interpretation of the French model of monarchical regime from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. The France of divided loyalties and legal constitutionalism described by Machiavelli is closer to the mixed “feudal” monarchy described (rather idealistically) by his contemporary Claude de Seyssel, than to the “absolutist” regime

13 In this passage Machiavelli did not imply that there was anything negative about the Ottoman model of centralized authority, but elsewhere he derided oriental rulers as destructive of civilization. In the Discorsi (2:2) to be enslaved to a prince is less harsh than to be enslaved to a foreign republic, since (unlike a rival community) the conquering prince will not want to destroy you “unless he is a barbarian prince who lays waste the countryside and civilized life [tutte le civilità degli uomini], as oriental princes do.” 15
15 Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Titii Livio, 1:16.
identified by an alternative tradition of commentators, from John Fortescue in the 1470s, though François Hotman in the 1570s, to both critics and admirers of Louis XIV in the late seventeenth century. In part the issue is assessing the impact of an actual historical evolution. There can indeed still today be much debate as to the extent to which the political system in France was transformed throughout this period, so that by 1700 one might be tempted to dismiss Machiavelli’s description of the independence of the lords of France, and their ability to command their own following, as belonging to the past. While French kings traditionally claimed the right to legislate, and in some cases also to tax, without any formal constraints, what is perhaps more decisive is that throughout the period the power of independent lords, if not formally destroyed, was certainly domesticated, episodes like the religious wars and the Fronde notwithstanding. By 1700, therefore, the rhetorical opposition between a mixed monarchy in England and an absolute rule in France, both within Europe, would have become more significant than the opposition between France and the Ottomans.

In this context that oriental monarchies could emerge as relevant models of despotic regimes distinct from both England and France, but closer to France than to England, given the relative lack of formal constraints on the power of the French king. As we shall see, it is precisely this fear of France becoming despotic through the neglect of the old aristocratic parliamentarian and legalistic “middle order” which lies behind Montesquieu’s analysis of oriental despotism. The France of Louis XV should lean towards the English model—or its own Gallo-Germanic feudal past—rather than towards the deceptively powerful (but in reality fragile) models of the East.

15 The difference between the assessments of royal power in France by the English Fortescue and the Savoyard Seyssel, the latter far more optimistic, can be related to Fortescue’s rejection of the idea of princely power in the Roman law tradition of the Bartolist school (albeit Seyssel, like many early modern constitutionalist writers, sought to moderate the regalist aspects of this tradition by integrating feudal law and humanist republican themes around the idea of a mixed constitution). Arguably, Fortescue’s position was, unlike Seyssel’s, immune to the Bodinian turn towards absolutism.

16 The distinction can be traced back to the dominium politicum et regale of John Fortescue in the fifteenth century. For a classic discussion see H. Koenigsberger, “Dominium regale or dominium politicum et regale: Monarchies and Parliaments in Early Modern Europe,” in Politicians and Virtuosi: Essays in Early Modern History (London, 1986).

It is clear that two different categories (not mutually exclusive) come into play in this European idea of ancient liberty, on the one hand the existence of legal and institutional constraints on royal power, on the other the existence of an aristocratic order of independent lords. Both were already present in Machiavelli’s idealized account of the kingdom of France, but the precise terms of the analysis—and in particular the nature of legal constraints to royal action—changed from author to author. There was perhaps a general shift from a feudal-constitutional emphasis apparent in many sixteenth-century writers, in which the traditional power of the aristocratic order—legal and institutional—is what keeps European subjects (especially aristocratic subjects) free from despotism, to the republican-constitutional emphasis of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers, in which legal constraints on royal action are increasingly referred to a dynamic pursuit of the common good through the (at least partly) independent action of parliamentary and judicial bodies. What is fundamental is that there was a basic continuity in the tradition of distinguishing European monarchies as upholding civil liberty, in contrast with the slavish condition of oriental peoples. That is, whilst European writers would debate intensely amongst themselves the extent to which political liberty was needed to uphold civil liberty within a monarchy, and thus which precise constraints should apply to the rule of a monarch, they tended to agree (to the extent that they considered the issue) that there was a negative model of despotic rule located outside Europe which should in all cases be seen as less desirable, if not entirely inappropriate.

Jean Bodin’s influential analysis, constructed around a powerful and maximalist defence of absolute sovereignty (and thus royal power) in the France of the wars of religion, stands as a perfect example of the reluctance of humanist lawyers with varying agendas to assimilate European claims to absolute rule to Asian models. In many ways Bodin’s discussion represents a shift away from the views expressed by Machiavelli, in that an absolute monarchy with centralized sovereign power is in his account not only legitimate but, indeed, European, being perfectly represented by France. In his eagerness to protect the state from rebellious tendencies, which he perceived as self-destructive, Bodin had decided to question the whole idea of a mixed type of government defended by constitutionalist writers like François Hotman, seeking to prove instead that sovereignty could not be other than absolute and undivided. For this reason, his defence of royal power could potentially erode the distinction between European regimes and despotic regimes. However,
Interestingly, Bodin also opposes his absolute European monarch to what amounts to a new formulation of the Asian type, a "monarchie seigneuriale" based on conquest and servitude for which Turkey is, again, the obvious modern example (although Christian Muscovy is also included). That is, despite Bodin's own defence of absolute sovereignty, a principle he sees as shared by all monarchies, the distinction between the European and Oriental (or African) models remains rhetorically necessary. It relates not to the sovereign powers of the king, but to the way these are exercised in different countries according to historical tradition and circumstance:

A royal, or legitimate, monarchy, is that in which the subjects obey the laws of the monarch, and the monarch the laws of nature, granting his subjects their natural liberty and private property. A despotic [seigneurial] monarchy is that in which the prince is lord of all goods and all persons by virtue of conquest and good war, governing his subjects as a father rules his slaves. A tyrannical monarchy is that in which the monarch, contemptuous of the laws of nature, abuses a free people and treats them like slaves, appropriating their goods as his own.18

In a remarkable show of conceptual ingenuity, Bodin makes "monarchie seigneuriale" peculiar to countries where either conquests are recent or the servile condition of people traditional, or both. This type of ruler has not subjects, but slaves (unlike a tyrant, who treats free subjects as slaves). Bodin effectively retains the core of the Aristotelian distinction but challenges the Machiavellian analysis by suggesting that you can actually be a "free subject" under a bureaucratic, centralized, non-feudal monarchy, provided the absolutely sovereign king costumarily and willingly respects private property and natural liberty. Thus Bodin manages to totally separate civil liberty, based on natural law, from political liberty, based on constitutional theories he rejects. The oddity here is of course that "natural law" and the European tradition of civil liberty become assimilated.

The attacks on absolutism and defence of an aristocratic middle order by post-Bodinian constitutionalist writers tended to oppose Bodin's absolute sovereignty and thus, when relevant, his reduced definition of despotism (one which, on the other hand, was taken up by Hobbes). There were of course throughout the seventeenth century attempts to build moderate royalist, anti-despotic positions on the basis of Bodin's

---

18 Bodin, *Six livres de la République*, Book 2, chapter 2, “On Despotic Government.” I have used the standard French edition of 1579 (Lyons), 189-91, in which Bodin incorporated changes introduced in the editions of 1577 and 1578 to his 1576 original. An altogether new version was produced by Bodin in Latin in 1586.
This rather paradoxical middle position is best represented by writers who argued for a limited, contractual monarchy without subscribing to the classical ideal of a mixed constitution, seeking to preserve instead the idea that sovereignty was indivisible. This "Bodinian" (or "Hobbesian") constitutionalism emerged, for example, in the writings of Pufendorf, against the dominant tradition of political Aristotelianism in the German-speaking world.

The flaw of the absolute monarch—as variously defined by Bodin, Hobbes, or Filmer—was that he assumed exclusively both the legislative and executive powers, denying subjects any genuine instance of appeal: "such a man, however intitled Czar, or Grand Signior, or how you please, is as much in the state of nature with all under his dominion as he is with the rest of mankind" (Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. P. Laslett [Cambridge, 1968], 326). Despite the vagueness of his references, which must be attributed to his desire to construct a universal (not "oriental") concept of absolutist government, Locke was not indifferent to historical example. He was an assiduous reader of travel accounts and used the case of Ceylon, as described by Robert Knox in his 1681 relation, to illustrate the misconception that absolute rule had any good effects.

Earlier John Locke, following a "geometric" rather than an empirical historical method, had even been more radical, since in his opinion any absolute ruler who was not subject to an independent system of laws was not truly legitimate. He and his subjects lived in a "state of nature," but worse, and "despotical power" (hence defined in a reduced manner) was the arbitrary power to take men's lives—in effect through war, albeit in the guise of political authority. Only a properly constituted civil society could safeguard lives and property. By totally denying the legitimacy of any absolute monarchy and its capacity for legislation, Locke departed from the Aristotelian tradition, later taken up by Montesquieu, of conferring in principle an equivalent status to non-European monarchic traditions, even if only to praise the moderate systems of Europe as superior. Rather than follow Locke, in his analysis of despotism Montesquieu was heir to the contemporary French tradition of anti-absolutist writers represented by Michel Le Vassor’s *Les soupirs de la France esclave* (1689-1690) and the thinkers of the regency during the minority of Louis XV, a tradition which in some cases had assimilated optimisitc defence of civil liberty as an expression of natural law (we might include Pierre Gassendi and Samuel Pufendorf in this category), but they tended to remain ambiguous on the crucial point of where the ultimate power of the state was.
a moderate interpretation of Bodin’s paternalistic royalism (writers like Bernier and Bayle exemplify this tendency), but which took a more radical turn towards the defence of religious and political freedom after Louis XIV revoked the edict of Nantes in 1685 and made his bid for European hegemony, reviving the spectre of a universal monarchy. In this tradition, despotism was primarily non-European and somewhat legitimate, and the point of these writers was to warn of the danger that a French monarch might lean too dangerously in the same direction, with fatal consequences, since—as Montesquieu put it—a moderate government is “a masterpiece of legislation that chance rarely produces and prudence is rarely allowed to produce.” Hence in Montesquieu’s mature, systematic treatment, political liberty was defined as the moderation of power through the separation of legislative, executive, and judicial functions, so that the French Monarchy, with an independent judiciary, stood mid-way between the English example—perfectly geared towards the preservation of political liberty—and Asian ones—where all powers are confused.

It is important to note that, unlike Montesquieu, neither Machiavelli nor Bodin actually used the word “despotism”; in fact, even the adjectival form, “despotic,” only returned to regular use in the late sixteenth century. For example, the vernacular expression employed by Bodin to describe the Turkish model, “monarchie seigneuriale,” had been coined by the humanist Louis Le Roy when producing a French version of Aristotle’s Politics, while English and Dutch writers in the early seventeenth century would translate “despotic” (already current in Italian) as “absolute,” using “absolute” to describe a systematic (rather than circumstantial)

---

22 While many of these anti-absolutist writers directly followed the sixteenth-century humanist strategies of François Hotman (centered around the idea of an ancient mixed constitution), against whom Bodin had written, others who contributed to the climate of opinion against the excesses of Louis XIV after the 1680s—notably Pierre Bayle, and also François Bernier as interpreter of Gassendi—preferred the stability of a law-abiding absolute monarchy capable of guaranteeing a degree of intellectual and religious freedom to the civil strife that either the idea of a mixed type of government or the principle of popular sovereignty and the right to resist (including tyrannicide) were believed to encourage. A crucial inspiration to a more radical opposition to the monarchy of Louis XIV as despotism came of course from the example of the English revolution of 1688. However, let us also note that while Locke’s second treatise had an important career in its French version of 1691, produced by the Huguenot exile David Mazel, it came to confirm and strengthen, rather than create, the French tradition of opposition to royal absolutism. For example, Michel Le Vassor’s Soupirs of 1689-1690 was written and published independently from Locke, and in fact the English edition preceded the first edition of Locke’s treatises in 1690.

23 The Spirit of the Laws, 63.
tyranny. And yet, as R. Koebner showed in his erudite study of the history of the concept of despotism, there had been an occasional medieval use of the Greek word, with expressions like *monarchia despotica* or *despoticus principatus* employed by Aristotle’s earlier translators. Indeed, as scholastic writers like Marsilius of Padua offered their own constitutional theories of government, they found it useful to find authoritative confirmation that unbridled monarchical power, not subject to the representative legislative body, leads to despotic rule. However, humanist writers like Leonardo Bruni were disinclined to reproduce Greek concepts, often preferring Latin equivalents like *dominatio*. In fact, interestingly, Roman authors had neglected to develop the Aristotelian idea of an Asian type of monarchy. Thus the pervasiveness of the assumption that Eastern peoples were naturally (usually by reason of their climate) more servile than Europeans did not always correspond to an explicit use of Aristotle’s concept of despotism. When the actual concept re-emerged in the seventeenth century as occasionally applicable to European monarchies, it was mainly to denounce absolute monarchial rule.

What is remarkable is the extent to which writers with different agendas found it desirable to return to the fundamental idea of an Asian model distinct from the European according to the themes of liberty and slavery. This continuity, I would like to suggest, did not reflect a mere recurrence of Aristotle’s text, which was in fact read selectively, but rather responded to the actual evidence of non-European systems of monarchical government. That is, in order to explain the importance of the Asian model we need to turn away from the mere analysis of the domestic agendas of European political writers and seek to explain the impact of actual perceptions of the Ottoman, Muscovite, and other states.

---

24 Roman writers abandoned the Greek concept of despotism, but retained that of tyranny, which they needed soon enough to describe some of their own emperors. The loss of liberty deplored by first- and second-century writers like Lucan and Tacitus did not lead to an elaboration of the Aristotelian analysis of despotism (Koebner, “Despot and Despotism” 278). These writers had not forgotten that, unlike Asian peoples, they were meant to be, as masters of the world, free—hence for Tacitus Roman debasement was morally reprehensible because it was essentially improper.

25 Hobbes, however, seeking to define the authority of the state as unassailable by citizens once constituted, also created his own minimalist definition of a despotic type of monarchy, one which like Bodin’s emphasized conquest but was otherwise not to be distinguished from any other monarchical regime.
Despotic Government in Renaissance Cosmography and Travel Writing

The influence of travel writing on European political thought has often been neglected, even though the evidence suggests that images of savages as “natural men,” on the one hand, and of oriental rulers as “despots,” on the other, evolved largely out of the literature produced by actual exotic encounters. One crucial moment for the emergence of the image of the oriental despot was clearly the late sixteenth century, in the writings of the influential Catholic cosmographer and former Jesuit Giovanni Botero.26 However, not only has his role been under-appreciated (Koebner does not even mention him, jumping from Bodin to Hobbes), but to the extent that Botero’s contribution has been recognized by writers like Lucette Valensi, his reliance on a wide-ranging collection of empirical descriptions has also been neglected. In reality, as I shall illustrate, Botero’s use of various sixteenth-century travel accounts was comparative, going well beyond the traditional focus on the Turkish example. It superseded Bodin’s approach not only by its use of the actual word “despotico” (which his English and French translators would render as “absolute”), but also by an analysis of the theme of the ruler’s unconstrained access to private property, which writers of the second half of the seventeenth century would make central to the discussion of the ills of despotism.27 In this section I will argue that Botero’s cosmographical synthesis, in part inspired by his concern with reason of state, was central in the development of a concept of despotic government informed by the fresh empirical accounts of the sixteenth century. I will illustrate how the particulars of a number of non-European monarchies—especially Ottoman, South Indian, Mughal, and Russian—contributed to a more complex image of despotism in its causes and in its effects, generating a tension between a general definition and a vari-

26 The Piedmontese Giovanni Botero (c.1544-1617) entered the Society of Jesus at a young age (1559) and was ordained priest, but was compelled to leave in 1579 after repeatedly failing to be professed in the Society’s fourth vow (which would have made him a full Jesuit), or be sent to the Eastern missions. His superiors thought that he was too proud and “more inclined to human wisdom than to the divine.” He was nevertheless protected by the Archbishop of Milan, Carlo Borromeo, and later successively served Duke Carlo Emanuele of Savoy (he was his agent and spy in France in 1585) and Cardinal Federico Borromeo, whose secretary and counselor he became after 1586. It was in Rome and under Federico Borromeo that Botero in the following decade composed his key works.

27 Botero therefore stands as an important precedent for Montesquieu, something which previous historians of the concept of despotism have failed to consider.

The wide-ranging nature of Botero’s analysis is related to the purpose of his *Relationi Universali* (Rome, 1591-1596), an ambitious survey of the world which considered, in distinct sections, the geography, political economy, and religion of each major country, as known to late-sixteenth century European observers. The work was a commission from cardinal Federico Borromeo to describe “the state in which the Christian religion finds itself in the world today,” and it was Botero’s original contribution to make a full geographical and political-economic survey of the world the necessary preparation for a description of all its religions, justified by (but perhaps also transcending the nature of) the universalist pretensions of the Roman see.

Thus the second and most influential part of the *Relationi* (Rome, 1592) undertook an analysis of the system of rule and power of the major states of Europe, Africa, and Asia. It was here that Botero articulated a concept of “despotic government” (*governo despotico*), which applied to examples as varied as Turkey, Muscovy, Christian Ethiopia, Mughal India, Vijayanagara, Siam, and China (but, curiously, not Safavid Persia, whose government is considered “the most regal and political amongst the Muslims,” at a time when it was seen by Catholic powers as a potential ally against the Ottomans). This striking list suggests that for Botero the use of the

---


29 *Delle relationi universali*, part II (Rome, 1592), 174-5. The whole description is worth quoting as example of what distinguished non-despotic regimes: “This people’s government is the most regal and political amongst the Muslims: on the contrary, there is nowhere else amongst them where this sort of government flourishes. Because all others almost extinguish the nobility and rely on the work of slaves, and kill their brothers, or blind them; but amongst the Persians the nobility is highly esteemed. . . . They profess knighthood and gentility, enjoy music and literature . . . all of which the Turks
Aristotelian concept was a useful tool for classifying a number of existing monarchies primarily according to their principles of government as expressed in historical practice. The comparative use of evidence, in fact, helped Botero refine the Aristotelian model of despotic government. Thus his underlying thesis was that a fundamental difference between Europe and Asia could be related to natural conditions: whilst the size and climate of Asia favored great empires, the geographical setting in Europe encouraged diversity and divisions, which, when combined with the skills and characters of its peoples, gave Europeans their superior strength. In this way Botero came to articulate the idea (later taken up by many other writers) that the great empires of Asia, despite their inflated militarism, were weaker than the smaller and apparently divided European nations, and that a crucial mark of this oriental fragility was the prevalence of a system of despotic rule (governo despotico), which worked against the interests of society and the economy. While his description of each case carried different emphases, Botero made it clear that the majority of “oriental princes” shared a number of distinguishing traits, generally defined as the excessive, counter-productive concentration of authority and revenues. Thus despotism emerged as an analytical concept with a wide range of applicability, with a core definition of power without limitations, and various examples of how the lack of some of these structural limitations (religious, legal, constitutional, educational, economic, and geographical) conditioned the aims and effects of each regime.

There was some ambiguity concerning the role of religion in this construct, since Botero’s “just monarchies” tended to coincide with Roman Catholic ones, but the link between despotism and religious deviations (heresy, infidelity, or the paganism of the gentiles) was not established in any concrete sense, beyond the general idea that despotic
governments often sought to maximize the power of the state without caring to benefit their subjects. There could even be a notable exception to this supposed lack of concern for peace and justice, as China, strikingly, stood as a “benevolent” manifestation of despotism. In reality, more decisive than the predictable assumption that true religion—genuine Christianity—underlay just government was the idea that despotic regimes were recognizable for their lack of respect for private property and civil liberty. Unlimited control of the persons of his subjects and their goods is what made a king also a despot.

The Ottoman regime was perhaps the despotic regime par excellence:

Ottoman government is completely despotic [affatto despotico], for the Grand Turk is so absolute a master of all things within the bounds of his dominion, that the inhabitants are called his slaves, not his subjects; no man is his own master, nor of the house where he lives or the land he cultivates . . . and there is no single person, however important, whose life is safe, or who can feel secure about his station, since all depends on the discretion of the Grand Lord . . .

It follows that the common people are not allowed to bear arms, the army relies on renegade slaves—the famous janissaries—for its elite corps, local governors steal and confiscate from their subjects, the people are overly exploited, the land suffers from depopulation, and commerce is in the hands of foreigners. Only the system of timars, which makes it possible to maintain the large Turkish cavalry cheaply, seems to meet with Botero’s admiration.

Interestingly, this negative view of the Ottoman system, which (with variations) would become commonplace amongst European travelers in the first decades of the seventeenth century, was not really dominant...
in the sixteenth century, when observers tended to emphasize the strengths of the Turkish sultan and his extraordinary power, often (as in the Latin letters by the imperial ambassador and humanist Ogier Ghislain de Busbecq, full of admiration for Ottoman military virtues) in order to denounce the rivalries and lack of discipline of the Christian princes. As Lucette Valensi has argued with reference to the remarkably regular series of reports written by Venetian ambassadors, the emergence of the negative views to which the concept of despotism will give expression coincides with a gradual shift of power from the Ottomans to Europe. More to the point (given how gradual that shift of power was, even after Lepanto), she insists that the increasing tendency to describe the Ottoman monarchy as a tyrannical system after the 1570s relates to actual difficulties within the political system (a pessimistic judgement which, interestingly, Ottoman observers themselves shared). What had been admired in earlier accounts was order, discipline, and leadership; what was now deplored was injustice, corruption, and weakness. The concept of tyranny—with its connotation of illegitimacy—was thus applied not because the principles of government had changed, but because the system was no longer perceived to be working.

Valensi notes the agreement of Botero’s analysis of the Ottoman state as despotic with the change of perspective amongst the Venetian observers, but she fails to clarify whether the republic’s ambassadors inspired Botero, or were themselves influenced by his systematic and comparative

33 Augerius Gislenius Busbequius, Legationis Turcicae Epistolae Quator, ed. Zweder von Martels (Hilversum, 1994), in particular the third letter, p. 178. In English, see Ogier de Busbecq, Turkish Letters, ed. and trans. Edward S. Forster (Oxford, 1927). Busbecq was ambassador to the Ottoman court on behalf of Habsburg emperor Ferdinand I in 1555-1562, although the letters, published in the 1580s, were rhetorically elaborated after his return. There is a growing literature on the image of the Turks in sixteenth-century Europe. See especially the classic work by Clarence Dana Rouillard, The Turk in French History, Thought and Literature 1520-1660 (Paris, 1938).


35 For the Ottoman myth of a “golden age” under Süleyman, and seventeenth-century attempts to react to political crisis by returning to it, see also Christine Woodhead, “Perspectives on Süleyman,” in Süleyman the Magnificent and His Age: The Ottoman Empire in the Early-Modern World, ed. M. Kunt and C. Woodhead (Harlow, 1995).

36 Whether the difficulties in the workings of Ottoman government perceived by many foreign observers and deplored by some at home from the end of the sixteenth century can really be considered a structural crisis—the beginnings of a very long decline which would extend into the eighteenth century—is controversial. What seems clear, however, is that the analysis of the regime as despotic accompanied that perception.
formulation.\textsuperscript{37} Whilst the use of the word “despotic” is extremely rare in the Venetian reports of the sixteenth century (Valensi only finds one example, from an anonymous report possibly dating from c.1580), it is true that “tyranny” had come to depict a degenerate monarchical system not dissimilar to the despotism that Botero would soon write about. And yet I would insist that the force of Botero’s formulation is new: he is clearly suggesting that this is Aristotle’s special type of monarchy, not merely a monarchy like those in Europe, which happens to have degenerated into tyranny, but a well-established and thus legitimate if altogether undesirable alternative system.\textsuperscript{38} Botero is also writing as if this kind of monarchy, whether successful or in crisis, is to be expected outside Europe. It was, moreover, only after the \textit{Relationi universali} had made an impact in Europe that the description of the Ottoman state as a system of despotism became generalized.\textsuperscript{39}

It seems sensible to conclude that when conceptualizing the Ottoman state and other oriental regimes Botero must have been more influenced by Aristotle, Machiavelli, and Bodin, all of whom he had read, than by the Venetian accounts or other descriptions he used. This is not, however, to deny the influence of primary accounts in shaping Botero’s work: the \textit{Relationi universali} as a genre took initial inspiration from them, and indeed followed similar categories of analysis to those employed by

\textsuperscript{37} For example, the influential report by the ambassador Lorenzo Bernardo (1592) is the one closest to Botero’s kind of analysis, describing a government based on the Sultan’s will (hence the trouble when he is weak and ignorant), sustained by means of oppressive tyranny over both the people and the nobility, and made powerful by the quality of the army and the vast resources at its disposal. See E. Albèri, \textit{Relazioni degli ambasciatori veneziani al senato durante il secolo decimosesto} (Florence, 1844), 2:362-66. No direct influence between his account and Botero’s can be read either way. On the other hand, we are certainly talking about the same cultural milieu, one in which Aristotle’s \textit{Politics} would be very familiar.

\textsuperscript{38} Valensi, \textit{Birth}, 77, speaks of “tyrannical” and “despotic” as synonymous concepts, “interchangeable” throughout the seventeenth century. While it is true that the two are often combined by the same writers, I believe that there is an important difference between a monarchy comparable to those in Europe that has gone awry and one which, because it is in fact not like European monarchies, is bound to have gone awry.

\textsuperscript{39} Besides the numerous Italian editions, foreign translations and adaptations made Botero’s work—and especially the second part—influential all over Europe at the turn of the seventeenth century: there were versions in Latin (1596), German (1596), English (1601, with numerous later editions), Spanish (two versions in 1603 and 1605), and Polish (1609). There was no direct French translation, but the popular work by Pierre d’Avery, \textit{Les etats, empires et principautez du monde} (Paris, 1614, and many later editions and translations) was in reality largely based on Botero’s \textit{Relationi}, although without acknowledgement. In particular, d’Avery followed Botero closely in the description of oriental regimes, translating “governo despotico” for “gouvernement absolu.”
the Venetian ambassadors, like *ricchezze, governo, forze, principi confinanti*, etc. It could be said that Botero brought together two strands, theoretical and empirical, into an unprecedented level of interaction. The question remains whether the armchair cosmographer did violence to the observations of his travelers when applying a general idea of despotism to a variety of non-European states. From an analysis of Botero’s use of primary descriptions, I would argue that the cosmographer did not arbitrarily impose a pre-existing Aristotelian concept of despotism on all oriental regimes, but rather relied on the descriptions themselves, and some genuine comparisons, to determine whether a particular state should be classified as despotism. That is, while the descriptions he used rarely included the notion of despotism, as I will show below they contained sufficient elements to allow Botero to define each state one way or the other without doing obvious violence to the information contained in his sources. To a large extent, we might conclude, his concept of despotism was not merely Aristotle’s legal tyranny: it was shaped by the actual examples that he was considering, as described by previous travel writers and historians.

Let us consider, to begin with, the way despotic government could be seen to be applicable to a variety of examples. It is not impossible that his analysis of the Ottoman regime—the non-European state sixteenth-century European commentators were most concerned with—helped shape Botero’s approach to other oriental monarchies by building variations of one central theme. However, it is far from certain that this example alone determined his approach. In the 1580s, at about the same time when (as we have seen) perceptions of the Ottoman empire acquired an anti-despotic tinge, the Muscovy of Ivan IV also emerged in a number of European descriptions as a regime with all the traits of a despotism. It was in fact the Russian regime which inspired Botero to offer his most powerful definition of despotism: “The Great Duke of Muscovy rules his peoples more despotically than any other known

---

40 The issue is raised by W.G.L. Randles, “‘Peuples sauvages’ et ‘états despotiques’: la pertinence, au XVI siècle, de la grille aristotélicienne pour classer les nouvelles sociétés révélées par les découvertes en Brésil, en Afrique et en Asie,” *Mare Liberum* 3 (1991): 299-307. For a preliminary and still unsurpassed study of Botero’s use of his sources, see F. Chabod, “Giovanni Botero,” 377-430: “Le fonti delle ‘Relazioni universali’ e il metodo di Botero.” Chabod concludes that Botero followed closely a wide range of written sources, often obtaining the most recent accounts, but he worked too quickly and made many small errors. He lacked a consistent method capable of fulfilling his organic vision of the world (pp. 424-30). For the following I also rely on my own analysis of the example of Vijayanagara in *Travel and Ethnology*, 294-300.
prince, given that he can dispose with absolute discretion of the persons and the goods of all his subjects.”

In this context, the comparison with the Turkish regime emerged as a commonplace which Eastern rulers could themselves employ: hence, “The vizir Mehemet used to say that the Turkish and Muscovite princes were the only ones who were absolute lords of their dominions.” For his treatment of Russia, Botero was largely influenced by a recent account by the Jesuit Antonio Possevino, papal ambassador and missionary to the court of Ivan IV in 1581-1582, who in his Moscovia (1586) had described the extravagant deference shown to the Tsar by his terrified subjects and observed that “the prince formally declares himself to be the residuary legate of all the land in his country and everything upon it.” However, here again Botero’s account, when introducing his neo-Aristotelian (and Bodinian) analysis of Muscovy as a model of oriental despotism opposed to a regal and political system of rule, had gone beyond summarizing his sources, or asserting the servile nature of the Russians.

---

41 Botero, Relationi, II, 1592, 74.
42 Ibid. Possevino gave a variant version of this, saying: “I heard from a prominent man that Muhammed, one of the councillors of Suleiman, the father of the present Sultan of Turkey, had once said that the king of Poland was undertaking a difficult task in attacking Muscovy, because the Sultan and the Prince of Muscovy were the only rulers in their world who kept their peoples under strict control, and this made them exceedingly powerful.” See The Moscovia of Antonio Possevino S.J., ed. Hugh F. Graham (Pittsburgh, 1977), 30. Interestingly, the Elizabethan ambassador Giles Fletcher, totally independently, reached the same verdict of the rule of Ivan IV: “The manner of their government is much after the Turkish fashion, which they seem to imitate as near as the country and reach of their capacities in political affairs will give them leave to do.” See Giles Fletcher, Of the Rus Commonwealth, ed. Albert J. Schmidt (Ithaca NY, 1966), 30.
43 The first edition (in Latin) was printed in Vilnius in 1586, but Botero could have used one of the two editions that appeared in Köln and Antwerp in 1587. The translation into Italian of 1592 came too late for Botero’s Relationi. A more distant source for Botero, but of great importance, was the commentaries of his journeys to Muscovy by the imperial (Austrian) ambassador Sigismund von Herberstein, published in 1549, translated into Italian in 1550, and probably known to Botero through Ramusio’s inclusion in the second edition of his collection (1574).
44 For Herberstein, “those people prefer servitude to freedom” (Ramusio, Navigazioni e viaggi, 6 vols (Torino, 1978-86), ed. M. Milanesi, 3:775). However, this statement does not relate to any systematic analysis of the Russian political system. Possevino was more subtle: “One would assume that the Muscovites were a people born more to slavery than achievement were it not for the fact that most of them fully realize the nature of their servitude and know that if they should flee the country their children should be killed on the spot and all their property would be immediately confiscated. They have grown accustomed to this sort of life from childhood and it has become second nature, as it were, for them to praise the prince extravagantly….” (Moscovia, 11). However, it was Botero who organized observations like this to describe a coherent system of
Botero’s creative use of primary descriptions can also be illustrated with the case of the South Indian kingdom of “Narsinga” (Vijayanagara), since it is quite possible to trace back Botero’s account to his reading of the third decade of the Portuguese Historian João de Barros (1563), whose key primary source can be in turn identified as the chronicle written by the horse trader Fernão Nunes (c.1531). From Nunes to Botero we can discern a process of elaboration which, in some important ways, implies a process of “orientalization.” For Nunes, the king of Vijayanagara was an impressive ruler, able to raise huge armies, who shared the revenues of the kingdom with his “captains.” The captains were obliged to keep a number of elephants, cavalry, and troops according to the size of their holdings (in a system reminiscent of the better-known jagirs of the Mughal empire) and in addition paid half of their rents to the king. The peasants, on the other hand, paid an enormous proportion of their produce to their overlords, who treated them “tyrannically” by European standards. It was in relation to the peasants, rather than in relation to the “nobility,” that this system was deplored by the Portuguese trader, although he also noted that the king was obliged to keep a close watch on his captains and could, at his discretion, dispossess them. In fact, according to Nunes (who for his dynastic history followed native sources as well as his personal observations of various years in the Indian capital), the kings of Vijayanagara were perceived as tyrants, or not, according to their personal morality and political skill, rather than by the rules of their political system. He did not use the concept of despotism. By contrast, Botero, who found in Barros an elegant summary of Nunes’s analysis, emphatically chose to describe the government of Vijayanagara as a despotism, with the king as “absolute lord of all the resources of his dominions” (padrone de i fondi del suo stato), a system of monopolies which he shared with his captains at the expense of the people, who were left with nothing but the effort. This was only the starting point for a more ambitious speculation concerning the way “oriental princes” cared not for peace and justice, but only for war and power, leading to a comparison with the kingdom of France to show
the hidden advantages of proper monarchical, hence limited, rule. The king of France, by being less absolute (that is, by being subject to legal limits), secures a better distribution of wealth, so that his peasants are much better off. He is therefore able to rely on taxing the wealth of his subjects for his needs without endangering the prosperity of the kingdom (remarkably, Botero attempts to quantify this differential). In other words, and despite appearances to the contrary, in relative terms the kings of France are more powerful than oriental despots.

The hollowness of the might of the oriental despot can be illustrated with Botero’s discussion of the Mughal empire in North India. He begins by observing that oriental, and meridional, princes are able to command much larger (but not better) armies than European rulers, not only because they can concentrate all the resources of the state on maintaining the military establishment, but also because they do not care to arm, feed, and provision their armies properly as is done in Europe. This situation is then related to the fact that all these princes are “tyrants”: they treat all their subjects as slaves and rely on fear, rather than love, to maintain their power. Therefore, the military elites—from the janissaries of the Ottoman state to the nayars of Malabar—are allowed to abuse the population, who can never be trusted to aid their ruler (a ruler whom they must hate) without coercion. A similar analysis of Mughal military power would be taken up by François Bernier in the following century, when he argued that 25,000 French veterans led by one of Louis XIV’s generals would with their superior discipline and morale easily defeat the disorderly mass of a Mughal army of hundreds of thousands, who marched “with the irregularity of a herd of animals” and were so easy to throw into confusion once engaged.47

To sum up, Botero’s development of the idea of despotism as an analytical tool was the result of reading creatively, and through an Aristotelian (and Bodinian) lens, a number of sixteenth-century empirical accounts, which in a number of cases—especially in descriptions of Turkey, Russia, and India—already contained elements that supported a fundamental opposition between European and non-European political regimes.48 The most important consequence of Botero’s analysis was


48 In the case of the African Christian kingdom of Abyssinia or “Prester John,” for which Botero could rely on the Ramusio’s Italian version (Venice, 1550) of the extensive account written by the Portuguese priest Francisco Alvares (Lisbon, 1540), it is also
notable that while Botero followed his source quite closely when describing the absolute power of the king to give and take lands from his lords at his discretion, and the unenterprising character of the inhabitants due to the arbitrary exactions they suffered from the great men, he created a totally new impression when selecting points like these (often made in passing by Alvares) out of a mass of observations in order to define the regime as a kind of despotism, with both rich and poor treated “more like slaves than subjects.” Compare Alvares in Ramusio, Navigazioni (ed. M. Milanesi), 2:81-385 to Botero, Relationi, II, 194. For a careful modern discussion of land tenure in the kingdom of Ethiopia, including the principle that tribute was explained because “the king was ultimate owner of all the land of the country and from him stemmed the right to occupy, own and use it” see Donald Crummey, Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia, from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century (Urbana and Chicago, 2000), 11.

49 Botero’s position on this issue seems to be traditional monarchical, but perhaps also Bodinian (he is not explicit).
were wont to do, because the people, being oppressed and spoiled of their get-
tings, are discouraged from their labors.10

It is remarkable the way Fletcher links the liberty of the nobility to the
well-being and rights of the common people—an argument which in
Europe would become the key to the controversial claim by defenders
of mixed constitutions that aristocratic liberties were the basis for repub-
lican freedom. For Fletcher, who in this sense clearly goes beyond the
Boterian definition of “regal and political government,” what is crucial
is the nature of parliament: “for to propound bills what every man thin-
keth good for the public benefit, as the manner in England, the Rus
Parliament [the Sobor] alloweth no such custom nor liberty to subjects.”11

Despite this novel emphasis on political liberty, Fletcher’s agreement
with many of Botero’s themes is equally remarkable. This suggests that
the most important historical factor to consider in the re-emergence of
oriental despotism as a key political concept is not the genius of any
single writer (like Botero) in putting together new observations with clas-
sical theories to give the Greek concept a new life. Rather, we should
consider the structural tension felt in various parts of Europe between
the actual observations of an unprecedented number of travelers engaged
in detailed empirical descriptions, and the revived concern and contro-
versy about the possible benefits of mixed constitutions, or other forms
of legal constraints on monarchical power, against the supposed neces-
sity of an absolute sovereign authority. Aristotle’s distinctions could be
a helpful aid for this debate but did not pre-determine its existence. In
this light, Botero and Fletcher seem to stand at the two ends, conser-
vative and radical, of a common European position. Throughout the
dramatic seventeenth century, as the debate on the limits of royal and

10 Fletcher, Of the Rus Commonwealth, 30, 66-67. Soon after publication in 1591, the
book was denounced by the Muscovy Company as undiplomatic for a number of pas-
sages, including Fletcher’s negative views about Russian government, and Lord Burghley
was pleased to suppress it. Richard Hakluyt was also sceptical about the book’s publi-
cation and eventually included an expurgated edition in his Principal Navigations of 1598-
1600. It is not impossible that in this reaction the Elizabethan regime was more concerned
with keeping alive amongst investors the hopes then placed on the Muscovy trade than
with the perhaps far-fetched idea that the book would reach the ears of Ivan IV and
cause fatal offence.

11 Ibid., 34. By contrast, and unlike later writers, Botero’s idea of regal government
was not very specific on the constitutional front. In particular, in his Reason of State (1589)
he neither took a Bodinian or an anti-Bodinian line concerning the nature of sover-
eignty and the powers of parliamentary bodies. His concern was limited to proposing a
conservative reason of state by which the pursuit of dominion and empire could be
made compatible with both justice and prudence.
state power grew in Europe, often reflecting the varying fortunes of absolutist and parliamentarian regimes, political thinkers moved between the Bodinian position of emphasizing civil liberty as the mark of all constitutional monarchies (as opposed to conquest states), to, more radically, arguing that political liberty was no less crucial to any successful regime. The English revolution and Montesquieu eventually settled the argument in the latter form, but not (as we shall see) without further contributions by travel writers.52

The radical Protestant parliamentarian Fletcher and the Catholic monarchist and Jesuit cleric Possevino represent dramatically opposite religious and ideological strands in the history of sixteenth-century Europe, and given the many underlying rivalries in the 1580s, had they failed to miss each other by seven years in the Muscovy of Ivan IV, they would probably have sought to harm each other’s mission (Fletcher was as ardent an anti-papist as Possevino was keen to persecute heresy). However, at the same time they shared a humanist education and came to broadly similar conclusions about the unpolished, barbarous, and highly undesirable nature of Russia’s political regime.53 Fletcher and Possevino also represent two manifestations of an increasingly important late Renaissance phenomenon, the emergence of the educated traveler as “philosophical” observer of foreign peoples and their customs, religions, and politics.

The Philosophical Traveler and the Analysis of Oriental Monarchies: Bernier’s India

Few travelers of the seventeenth century represented better than the French doctor François Bernier (1620-1688) the critical spirit of the independent lay observer. As a personal disciple of Gassendi, and in

52 It might be useful to clarify here that Montesquieu did not argue that all moderate monarchies enjoyed true political liberty: moderate monarchies limited royal power through a combination of judicial and aristocratic institutions, but to the extent that they were genuine monarchies, they were ultimately vulnerable to the fact that the king controlled both the executive and the legislative functions. His point was that political liberty could only truly flourish when the power to legislate was placed in the hands of an independent senate or parliament, and that otherwise civil liberty was always under the threat of despotism.

53 In a new European political imagination which cut across the confessional divide of the Latin Church, a seventeenth-century vision exemplified, for example, in the ingenious plan by Henry IV and his minister Sully for artificially creating a system of balance of powers at the expense of the Habsburgs, Russia belonged, with Turkey, to Asia: it was a “barbarous country” not truly fit to be included as an equal power within Christendom. See E. Hale, ed., The Great Design of Henry IV (Boston, 1909), 21.
fact his key popularizer, he was closely acquainted with the new post-sceptical, rationalist philosophies of the mid-seventeenth century. Bernier’s contribution to the popularization of Gassendism and his related philosophical activities (he was both an anti-Aristotelian and an anti-Cartesian) are discussed by Sylvia Murr in her important article, “Bernier et Gassendi: une filiation déviationniste?” in Gassendi et l’Europe 1592-1792, ed. S. Murr (Paris, 1997), and in the special issue (ed. Murr) of Corpus: revue de philosophie 20-21 (1992), dedicated to “Bernier et les gassendistes.” See also Thomas M. Lennon in The Battle of the Gods and Giants: The Legacies of Descartes and Gassendi, 1655-1715 (Princeton, NJ, 1993), esp. 78-87.

Bernier presented his reason to travel quite simply as “le désir de voir le monde,” and his itinerary from Egypt to India seemed rather random, but neither his contemporaries nor himself were ignorant of his philosophical pretensions. As fellow-traveler Monsr. de Monceaux [des Maizeaux] put it in 1670 when sending a copy to the secretary of the Royal Society Henry Oldenburg, who thus became Bernier’s first English translator, “never a traveller went from home more capable to observe, nor has written with more knowledge, candour and integrity.” He was, indeed, “of a mould I wish all travellers were made of.” Bernier, Travels in the Mogul Empire, ed. V.A. Smith (London, 1914), xlix-li.

That is, Bernier’s scepticism about Hindu “superstition” is clearly linked to his adherence to the new rationalist philosophies and science (in his case Copernican-Galilean as well as atomist-Epicurean) and implies a potential criticism of Christianity (or at least some elements of Christianity) as an expression of “crédulité enfantine.” See also Peter Burke, “The Philosopher as Traveller: Bernier’s Orient,” in Voyages and Visions: Towards a Cultural History of Travel, ed. J. Elsner and J.P. Rubiés (London, 1999), 124-37, esp. 135. Nicholas Dew discusses Bernier’s letter in relation to two distinct “contexts of knowledge production,” Mughal and French, in his “The Pursuit of Oriental Learning in Louis XIV’s France,” unpublished D.Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 1999, chp. 3.
Mughal regime which was to influence many future writers—in fact, up to the twentieth century. Together with contemporary observers like Jean Chardin or Paul Rycaut, who visited, respectively, Persia and Turkey, in his first-hand and extensive account Bernier provided a variety of early Enlightenment writers, most notably Montesquieu, with fresh material for their reflections and comparisons. Bernier’s intellectual cogency and his active participation in the republic of letters (especially in the 1670s and 1680s) through personal correspondance, controversies, learned journals, academies, and salons, his writings were unique in their capacity to shape the analysis of both gentilism and despotism, rather than merely provide empirical backing for a European debate. In fact Bernier’s authority with men such as Bayle and Locke, whom he knew and who closely read his account of India, gave a new impetus to the figure of the traveler as observer and interpreter of non-European realities. For this reason, it is especially crucial to determine where Bernier’s idea of despotism came from, and the extent to which it provided a writer like Montesquieu with the elements that made his analysis of despotism central to the subsequent debate about monarchy.

Bernier’s account of India as a despotic regime relies on a thorough analysis of its political institutions, and of their effects on the economy of the country. It is not, therefore, an “orientalist” construction predicated upon an idea of race: although Bernier was in fact known for a novel attempt to classify the peoples of the world according to racial types (rather than the traditional humanist division in terms of climates and continents), the peoples of India were essentially “like us Europeans,” so that the peculiar traits of the Mughal monarchy were the result of purely political-economic arrangements. Emphasizing this dimension,
Bernier’s discussion is cast as a piece of advice for Colbert, suggesting ways of encouraging the wealth of a country and avoiding decline. Despotism is therefore portrayed as a disastrous system from a mercantilist perspective. Bernier’s analysis of the negative effect of excessive royal claims on private property, while echoing some of Botero’s themes, is much more detailed and specific.60

In Bernier’s account, the wealth and greatness of India is in no doubt: the country is vast and fertile, has a flourishing textile industry, attracts gold and silver, and enjoys a favorable balance of trade. However, the king claims the property of all rents from the land (excepting “private gardens”), and this generates all kinds of awful consequences. In effect, a prosperous country is ruined through overtaxation. The peasants end up in debt and often enslaved, or run away, and much of the country remains uncultivated. This oppressive system supports a highly militarized regime, which is enormously expensive and offsets any benefits derived from the royal monopoly on all the rents. In addition, royal authority is in part fictitious. There are many independent chiefs and princes like Hindu rajas in remote areas, Afghan tribesmen near Persia, or Deccani sultans in the South, who, albeit vassals of the Mughal, are in reality potential enemies who contribute little to the treasury. The military elites are ethnically and religiously heterogeneous, and rely on a constant flow of foreign recruits— in particular, the Mughal relies on

60 I have used the first edition, in four tomes (but sometimes bound as two volumes), of which tomes 1 and 2 (Paris, 1670) are Histoire de la dernière révolution des États du Grand Mogol and Evenemens particuliers, ou ce qui s’est passé de plus considérable après la guerre pendant cinq ans… dans les États du Grand Mogol. Avec une lettre (à Mons. Colbert) de l’étenduë de l’Hindoustan, circulation de l’or et de l’argent pour venir s’y abimer, richesses, forces, justice, et cause principale de la décadence des États d’Asie. The letter to Colbert is therefore in Evenemens particuliers, 191-294. Tomes 3 and 4, including all the other letters, are bound together as Suite des mémoires de Sieur Bernier sur l’Empire du Grand Mogol (Paris, 1671). I have compared this with the standard two-volume early modern edition: Voyages de F. Bernier (Amsterdam, 1699; reprinted 1709). I have also consulted the annotated English modern version, Travels in the Mogul Empire, AD 1656-1668, trans. A. Constable, ed. Vincent A. Smith (London, 1914).
pitting native Hindu Rajputs or naturalized Pashtuns against foreign Persians and Turks in order to control each ethnic group (the Shia Persians are particularly dangerous, since the dynasty is Sunni). The elites are not, however, a hereditary class: their position in a hierarchy of rents and power depends on the arbitrary will of the ruler, who rewards or takes away land-grants (jagirs, similar to the Turkish timars) according to his perception of talent and fidelity. There is of course a direct link between the size of the rents awarded (or the money paid from treasury) and the number of troops, especially cavalry, which each lord—omrahs or mansebdars—is obliged to keep at the Mughal’s disposal. There is also a certain circularity in the system, in that the holders of grants of lands also need to offer part of their rents to the king.

The system guarantees that an enormous amount of cavalry is thus made available (Bernier estimates 200,000), but this army is predatory upon the productive classes, rural or urban. In fact, the fortune of cities depends on army consumption—the royal claim to all rural rents excludes the possibility of free cities with an independent economy. The wealth of merchants or tax farmers is always vulnerable to the arbitrary exactions of lords, governors, and the king, with the paradox that money, albeit abundant, does not circulate openly. There are no properly funded universities or colleges, and given that all is needed to join the elite is the will of the ruler, ignorance prevails (a good education, Bernier seems to assume, belongs to a hereditary class, even though he was himself of peasant origins, owing his philosophical training under Gassendi, and his doctorate in medicine at Montpellier University, to the patronage of François Luillier, and of Gassendi himself). In India, industry only prospers under direct aristocratic patronage, and yet the

---

61 Bernier describes the army in some detail including the role of European musketeers and the use of artillery. However, unlike in Europe, these were auxiliary forces; in Indian warfare infantry was far less important than the cavalry.

62 Bernier’s father, “cultivateur tenant à bail” in Angers, died when François was only five. He was introduced to Gassendi (himself of peasant origins) by Claude Chapelle, natural son of François Luillier, a notorious libertine who was Gassendi’s friend and patron in Paris. From 1641-1642, Gassendi taught his neo-Epicurean system to Chapelle, Bernier, and others (perhaps Molière). Hence Bernier joined the free-thinking “libertine” circles of the republic of letters (men like Patin, Chapelain, Cyrano de Bergerac, Mersenne, the Dupuy brothers, Montmort, and La Mothe Le Vayer; wrote against the astrologer J.-B. Morin on behalf of Gassendi’s Copernican system; and eventually became the latter’s secretary, all along furthering his own studies in medicine (he took his doctoral degree in 1652). Bernier found another patron in François Boisson, Sieur de Merveilles, a Provençal gentleman and diplomat with whom he first traveled to Poland in 1648-1650, and who later—after Gassendi’s death in 1655—supported his journey to the East.
aristocracy is itself economically insecure and vulnerable to the arbitrary will of the ruler. Although ideas of law and justice exist in the Mughal world, this system of power inevitably generates bribery and corruption, and only the poor, or occasionally merchants, are ever punished. The worst tyranny is therefore the one suffered by the peasants, since they lack any legal or institutional protection (such as exist in Europe) against the exactions of tax farmers and administrators working for the military elites:

Timar-holders, governors and tax-farmers have an absolute power [authorité comme absolue] over the peasants and even some strong authority over artisans and merchants living in cities or villages under their jurisdiction. Therefore, here we do not find either great lords or parliaments and presidents as with us, capable of keeping these people in check, nor are the kalis or judges powerful enough to repress their violence, nor, in a word, is there anybody whom a peasant, artisan or merchant might complain to against the tyrannies which are so often perpetuated against them by those who, with total impunity, abuse the royal authority placed in their hands... 

A continuous comparison with the situation in Europe, in particular France, underlies this analysis: a hereditary nobility, the right to private property, economically independent cities, and legal protection for all social classes are all, in the long term, beneficial to both the people and the state. Ultimately what is being compared is not just the Mughal regime to the France of Louis XIV, but two civilizations, one oriental (including the Ottoman and Persian monarchies, encompassing the whole of the Middle East), the other European, the first in decline despite its proverbial fertility, the latter prosperous thanks to the existence of legal limitations on royal power:

Those three countries, Turkey, Persia and Hindustan, do not have any idea of the principle of “mine” and “yours” concerning land and real estate, or the private property of all possessions, which is the foundation of all that is good and beautiful in the world. Therefore, they necessarily resemble each other in all essential points: having the same faults, they must, sooner or later, experience the same pernicious consequences: tyranny, ruin and misery. God forbid that our monarchs in Europe should also be the sole owners of all the lands which their subjects now possess. 

---

63 Bernier, Evenemens particuliers, 256-57. It is not clear whether Bernier included the zamindars within the category of tax-farmers or simply ignored them. Bernier goes on to make the exception of those living near the capital cities or important sea-ports, whose complaints have a chance of reaching the court. It is not, therefore, Bernier’s argument that the Mughals do not care about justice, but that they do not have the capacity to implement it generally.

64 Ibid., 277: “Ces trois États, Turke, Perse et l’Hindoustan, comme ils ont tous osté ce mien et ce tien à l’èsgard des fonds de terre et de la propriété des possessions, qui
Bernier’s political message is clear: if Colbert wants to achieve his aims of increasing the wealth of the country and thus the power of the state, he needs to be circumspect about royal claims over private wealth through taxation or any other means. Louis XIV is better served by moderation than through absolutism. Political despotism—one which an over-zealous Colbert might mistakenly lead Louis XIV towards—implies an insidious tyranny which operates at all social and economic levels, and leads to economic and cultural decline.65

It is worth noting that Bernier’s argument does not affect the issue of whether sovereignty is to be divided or is indivisible. In many ways Bernier seems to support a Bodinian analysis, in the sense that what is required to avoid despotism is a measure of civil liberty and especially a strict respect for private property, rather than any form of political liberty that places some of the powers of the state in the hands of representative assemblies.66 It is on the other hand implied that private property is part of a wider system of legal rights—such as succession and inheritance—which carries political implications, and which defines Europe (or, we might say, European civilization) as superior. I would argue that Bernier’s analysis, without addressing the issue of sovereignty, facilitated the transition from Bodin’s civil liberties to Montesquieu’s political liberties by identifying the despotic tendencies within a legitimate monarchy of the Bodinian kind—that is, one whose respect for the liberty and property of its subjects merely depended on custom and sovereign will.

If this was, as I suggest, an important contribution to the evolution of the concept, it is necessary to clarify the extent to which this owed anything to Bernier’s unique outlook as philosophical traveler. Let us consider, to begin with, the extent to which Bernier’s analysis relied on

---

65 Bernier does not say decline “of civilization”—the word did not yet exist—but describes the ruin of all the elements of civil life: agriculture, the arts, learning, and even political attitudes (honor and patriotism, for example, disappear, while corruption becomes pervasive).

66 The fact that the Turkish, Persian, and Mughal military elites who rule the despotic monarchies of Asia are to a large extent made up of foreigners also agrees somewhat with the Bodinian emphasis on conquest and enslavement. However, Bernier does not draw a clear argument of necessity.
existing discussions of the theme of oriental despotism. Not unlike most Renaissance travel writers, personal experience was central to Bernier’s rhetoric about the value of his observations. In his case, however, it was accompanied by a determination to put curious enquiry at the service of the concerns of a nascent republic of letters. He belonged to a post-sceptical generation committed to the possibility of a new modern science which would stand out for its clarity and economy (an ideal defined against the “obscurity” of scholastic Aristotelianism). Bernier’s close relation with Gassendi indicates his participation in a post-Aristotelian paradigm not only for philosophy and the physical sciences, but also for political thought. While in India, Bernier was busy explaining (and sometimes translating into Persian) the works of Gassendi, Descartes, and Harvey to his hosts. Bernier’s observations about Mughal India, although without doubt reflecting the analysis of a closely examined reality, do not therefore exclude the influence of previous readings and philosophical assumptions.

Bernier’s possible literary models as travel writer are difficult to elucidate because he mentions none. Limiting ourselves here to his political analysis, it is not obvious whether there is any direct influence from Botero, despite the obvious similarities. Bernier, on the other hand,

67 Bernier engaged in public philosophical argument (1651-1653) against the defender of traditional natural philosophy, Morin, and against Aristotelian scholasticism (1671), although he was also increasingly careful to distinguish the mechanistic atomism of Gassendi from the systems of Spinoza, Descartes, and Malebranche. There was also an aesthetic dimension to his “modernism”: he avoided the gratuitous display of humanist erudition so common in the period and tried to present a direct and fresh account of events and ideas written as if on a clean slate, without prejudice or ignorance.

68 Gassendi’s political thought, part of his ethics (a form of Christianized hedonism with emphasis on moral freedom) has often been neglected by contrast with his physics and ontology. For a thorough re-assessment see, however, Lisa T. Sarasohn, Gassendi’s Ethics: Freedom in a Mechanistic Universe (Ithaca and London, 1996).

69 The most important French collection of travel writing, the Relations de divers voyages by Melchisédech Thévenot, only appeared between 1663 and 1672, that is, during Bernier’s travels (Thévenot, through Chapelain, entered correspondence with Bernier, and sent him some questions of an antiquarian nature). In a fascinating letter of 1661, Jean Chapelain offered advice to Bernier as a traveler and as a travel writer, but the literary models he proposed were the works of Jesuit Martini on China (the Atlas sinensis of 1655 and the Sinicae historiae of 1658, both in Latin) and by Adam Olearius on Muscovy and Persia (published in German in 1647, in French in 1658), none of which were very close to Bernier’s eventual approach to his material. More interesting is his mention of “the English ambassador,” Thomas Roe, as a model for the history of Mughal India. See Lettres de Jean Chapelain, ed. Ph. Tamizey de Larroque (Paris, 1883), 2:166-72. Of Bernier’s European predecessors, Pietro della Valle comes closest to a “curious observer” of his kind, but his complete series of Italian letters were not published until 1658-1663, after Bernier had left Europe, with a French translation quickly fol-
could easily have read Johannes de Laet’s Latin synthesis De imperio Magni Mogolis (1631), the key European publication on Mughal India in the first half of the seventeenth century, which was largely based on material (much previously unpublished) provided by Dutch and English factors in Surat and Agra. Included in the series of “republics of the world” produced by the Leiden-based Elzevir press, which, at least in northern Europe, competed successfully with Botero’s cosmographical synthesis, De imperio Magni Mogolis transmitted an image of oriental despotism that substantially followed the observations made in a commercial report by the Dutch factor Francisco Pelsaert, active in Agra in the 1620s. De Laet’s analysis is recognizable as the possible skeleton for Bernier’s later account:

The Emperor of India is an absolute monarch [imperator absolutus]; there are no written laws: the will of the emperor is held to be law. Once a week he takes his seat on the tribunal and hears patiently all causes that are brought before him, both civil and criminal, and pronounces a judgement on each, which is final . . . all the affairs of the state are discussed in public. . . . No one who has a request to make from the emperor can gain audience without a gift, which he accepts whatever is to be his decision . . . for the rest the government is purely tyrannical [regimen tyrannicum], for the king is the sole master of all the kingdom, and gives estates at will to his subjects, or takes them away again. He often compels the magnates to change their places of residence together with the lands allotted to them. . . . hence it comes about that the whole country is carelessly cultivated. . . .

De Laet went on to emphasize the poverty of the peasantry (the royal officials “take for the king’s use about three quarters of all produce”), the lack of prosperity of artisans (they are numerous but ill-paid and “can rarely rise to a higher station, for fathers generally teach their children the same handicraft which they themselves practice”), and the insecurity of the merchants (“they are in great danger from informers, who bring charges, whether true or false, against them before the nobles, so..."

70 Pelsaert’s Remonstratie (written in Agra c. 1626), addressed to the directors of the Dutch East India Company, was De Laet’s most crucial source and went beyond the commercial concerns of the genre. Writing soon after the report reached Holland, De Laet may not have known who the author actually was since the materials had been transmitted by Pelsaert’s superior in Agra, Peter van den Broecke, to whom they were attributed in the preface to De Imperio Magni Mogolis (De Laet was otherwise remarkably scrupulous in identifying his sources). For a modern English version of Pelsaert’s Dutch account, see Jahangir’s India: The Remonstratie of Francisco Pelsaert, trans. and ed. W.H. Moreland and P. Geyl (Cambridge, 1925). Pelsaert was, like De Laet, originally from Antwerp, a Flemish exile settled in Holland.

that the wretched merchants are squeezed like a sponge, not without danger to life itself”). This is set against the “indescribable luxury and extravagance” of the life of the nobles, and helps explain the internal weakness of the empire: despite its vastness, the tyrannical character of government, the lack of religious unity, and the existence of many semi-independent princes with private armies living in remote, easy to defend areas, all combine to make the empire weaker than “realms which are thoroughly united and efficiently organized from within.”

As James Tracy has recently argued, De Laet represented an “armchair cosmographer” whose sweeping views on despotism can usefully be compared with the more nuanced picture presented by company officials conducting business in Surat and Agra, often more concerned with the petty tyranny of corrupt local officials disregarding imperial wishes than with the supposed despotism of the emperor as owner of all land revenues. However, what is perhaps more striking is the fundamental agreement between De Laet and his key source Pelsaert, whose analysis is clearly the ground upon which the European geographer builds. De Laet was, as a director of the West and (later also) East India Companies, closely involved in colonial business, and there is little sense of a fundamental gap between the “realistic” merchant and the “orientalizing” scholar. If anything, De Laet stood out for his sensible and critical use of sources. He did simplify when, for example, he stated that there are no written laws in Mughal India other than the will of the emperor, when Pelsaert had observed that laws do exist.

---

72 Ibid., 95, 88, 90, 241-43. The latter comments belong to a concluding chapter of the work with a “judgement” on the Mughal’s power, and expresses De Laet’s personal interpretation.


74 For this reason I find it unnecessary to introduce a domestic agenda in De Laet’s account, such as the supposed desire to castigate the “tyranny” of the Catholic Monarchy of Spain suggested by Tracy in ibid., 268. I am not sure that De Laet would have departed from the mainstream analytic tradition by which the Catholic Monarchy of Spain was not, at least in Europe (America was a different matter), structurally tyrannical, even if some particular policies in the Netherlands could be denounced as tyrannical by Protestants and by defenders of the mixed constitution.

75 For a “methodological” declaration, see De Laet’s preface to *De imperio magni Mogolit, sive India vera commentarius e variis auctioribus congressus* (Leiden, 1631), not translated by Hoyland and Banerjee in their English edition: “Nam qui ante nos aliquid de regno magni Mogolis exararunt, ab authoribus suis decepti molta incerta, quaedam etiam falsa prodiderunt; neque enim inustitatum est, eos qui longinquas peregrinationes obeunt, interdum falsa proveris, incerta pro certis lectoribus obtrudere. Mihi religio fuit quemquamsequi, nisi quem fide optima tradere quae viderat, aut a fide dignis acceperat judicabam. . . .”
only to be disregarded by greedy officials. However, the overall picture produced by the two writers is very similar. It is also clear that Pelsaert displayed his own brand of “orientalism”: his key theme, the contrast between the luxury of the wealthy elites and the vulnerability of the poor, with the corollary that the Mughal system produces a mixture of arrogance, instability, and corruption, certainly fits with classic elaborations of the insidious effects of “despotism” typically associated with later writers like Montesquieu (Pelsaert even discusses the peculiar psychology of the mahal, or harem, with over-indulged husbands, treacherous eunuchs and frustrated wives). That this “merchant’s orientalism” was not exceptional becomes obvious if we take a variety of European seventeenth-century primary sources—Dutch, French, or English—into account. Even an author as close to the native perspective as the English agent William Hawkins, who spoke Turkish, joined Jahangir’s court dressed in oriental garb, and acquired an oriental (Armenian) wife, was no less sweeping than De Laet when he wrote of the Mughal that “all the lands in his monarchie are at his disposing, who giveth and taketh at his pleasure”—a statement available to De Laet for his synthesis. The consistency of approach between merchant-observers and armchair cosmographers is supported by the example of a third kind of figure, the ambassador. The description of the Mughal regime produced by Thomas Roe, representative of James I of England to the court of Jahangir, in a series of letters of 1616 to Lord Carew, the Archbishop of Canterbury George Abbot, and Prince Charles, was also published by Samuel Purchas in 1625, and hence available to De Laet:

76 Compare in particular De Laet, 88-95, with Pelsaert, 54-63. As my preceding discussion indicates, when dealing with the issue of lack of legal protection, Bernier in many ways re-stated the case as Pelsaert had first formulated it (that there is no lack of written records in India, but rather an institutional bias towards official corruption and abuse). Bernier might in fact have at some point read a reduced version of Pelsaert’s “Remonstrantie,” which was published in French in 1663 by the influential travel collector Melchisédech Thévenot, one of Bernier’s correspondents in India. Bernier must at least have been aware of this publication on his return to France, but it makes little sense to suppose that when composing his letter to Colbert he substituted his fresh memories of the regimes of Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb with the observations of Jahangir’s court taken forty years earlier by the Dutch factor.

77 Another example of a merchant who seemed to believe that oriental traders were fundamentally less honest than Europeans was the French Georges Roques. La manière de négocier aux Indes (1676-1691), ed. V. Bérinstain (Paris, 1996), 25.

78 W. Foster, ed., Early Travels in India, 1583-1619 (London, 1921), 112. This was available to De Laet alongside other English accounts in the edition by Samuel Purchas, His Pilgrimes (London, 1625), a collection which the Dutch writer gratefully acknowledged (possibly on the grounds of ideological affinity as well as scholarly value).
Lawes they have none written. The kyng’s judgment bynds, who sitts and gives sentence with much patience, once weakly both in capitall and criminall causes; wher some tymes he sees the execution done by his eliphants with too much delight in blood. His governors of provinces rule by his femanes, which is a breefe lettre authorising them. They take life and goods at pleasure. . . In revenu doubllesse he exceeds eyther Turk or Persian or any Easterne prince. The summs I dare not name, but the reason: all the land is his, no man hath a foote. He maynteynes by rents, given of signoryes counted by horses, all that are not mechanique; and the revenues given to some are German princes estate. Secondly, all men ryse to greater and greater seignoryes as they rise in favour, which is only gotten by frequent presents, both rich and rare. Lastly, he heyses all men’s goods that dye, as well those gained by industry (as merchants) as those that lived by him . . .

Interestingly, Roe was also the model proposed by Jean Chapelain in 1661 to Bernier in India for his account of the history of the Mughals, although Bernier is unlikely to have read the English text, and a French version was only published by Thévenot in 1663.

In the light of the works of De Laet, Pelsaert, and Roe, we may conclude that Bernier’s account of despotism did not challenge any existing images, which were consistently generated by European observers in the milieu of the Mughal court. However, Bernier elaborated the theme with an analytical cogency and sense of complexity which neither De Laet nor any of his primary sources display. Let us now consider the more theoretical foundations of his analysis, namely Gassendi’s legacy as an ethical and political thinker. As it turns out, in his influential abregé of Gassendi’s system, a popularization in French of his master’s Latin ouevre, Bernier came to define despotism when discussing the classification of political systems. In Gassendi’s ethics, a “despotic” monarchy was an intermediate model between the “royal”

79 Letter to George Abbot, Archbishop of Canterbury (Ajmer, 29/1/1616), printed by William Foster, ed., The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India 1615-19 (London, 1926), 104-5. Compare to letters to Lord Carew (ibid., 88-92) and to Prince Charles (269-71). While Roe’s letters to Carew and Abbot may be deemed to have expressed his initial impressions, the fact is that when writing to Prince Charles nine months later Roe still offered the same kind of analysis.

80 Although the abregé was written after Bernier’s return from India (the first complete edition was in 1678), it was based on the Syntagma Philosophicum written earlier by Gassendi, with which Bernier was familiar before he left in 1656. Bernier had tended Gassendi at his deathbed in 1655 (shortly before he undertook his long oriental voyage), and, together with Habert de Montmort and Samuel Sorbière, he was entrusted with his philosophical legacy. However, Bernier was away when the philosopher’s Opera Omnia, including for the first time his Syntagma Philosophicum, was published in 1658, and his request to have a copy sent to India failed (Jean Chapelain argued that the book was difficult to locate: Lettres de Jean Chapelain, 170). For a detailed discussion of Bernier’s presentation of Gassendi’s writings in the Abregé, see Murr, “Bernier et Gassendi: une filiation déviationniste.”
and “tyrannical” forms: unlike the tyrant, who treats subjects “like slaves, or beasts,” depriving them of liberty and property against the dictates of natural law, the despot rules over conquered subjects “like a father his slaves”—the implication being that this rule is not entirely against the common good, and somewhat legitimate.81 Of course Gassendi was closely following Bodin, whose absolutist doctrine had prospered under Richelieu. And yet, interestingly, when translating and summarizing his master’s discussion of the key duties of the king in a “royal” monarchy—things such as the need for the ruler always to work for the common good of the people—Bernier added, out of his “long experience of travels in Europe and Asia,” his own theory concerning the importance of preserving the private property of lands and rents, in identical terms to those employed in his letter to Colbert.82 The issue here was not how to define “despotism”—Bernier simply referred to the regimes of Turkey, Persia, and India as negative examples—but rather to assert that economic prosperity and the common good required that the monarch should respect the property rights of all subjects.83 We could say that Bernier was re-stating Bodin’s original position concerning private property as part of natural law, against Hobbes’s reduction of natural law to self-preservation and his consequent radical amplification of the powers of the sovereign (so that no one can hold rights of property against a sovereign, and all monarchs are like despots).84 On the

81 Abregé de la Philosophie de Gassendi (Lyon, 1684), vol. 7, book 2, ch. 5, 364-65. A comparison of the editions of 1678 (vol. 8, 298-337) and 1684 (vol. 7, 357-406) shows that in the latter version Bernier amplified his summary of Gassendi’s political philosophy (or “political prudence,” one aspect of one of the “virtues” discussed as part of Gassendi’s “Ethics”). For example, he added Gassendi’s definition of despotism. The effect was to make the anti-tyrannical emphasis stronger. Interestingly, however, Bernier omitted in both editions Gassendi’s “Bodinian” attack on the Polybian mixed constitution, involving the sharing of sovereignty, although he reproduced Gassendi’s definition of suprema potestas (“souveraine puissance” and “souveraine authorite”). I have used as reference P. Gassendi, Opera Omnia (Lyon, 1658), 2:754-64.

82 Ibid., 246-49.

83 In this respect Bernier was only developing Gassendi’s ethical thought, as understood for example by Lisa Sarasohn. Gassendi’s philosophy has recently been seen as having influenced Locke through the medium of Bernier. See Sarasohn, Gassendi’s Ethics, chp. 8, and Lennon, The Battle of the Gods and Giants, chp. 3. This, however, has been contested by J.R. Milton, “Locke and Gassendi: A Reappraisal,” in English Philosophy in the Age of Locke, ed. A.M. Steward (Oxford, 2000), 87-109.

84 The contacts between Gassendi and Hobbes in Paris in the 1640s, and Gassendi’s support (with a preface) to the edition of De Cive at the Elzevir Press in 1647, suggest that Gassendi could have been influenced by the political philosophy of Hobbes. However, on a number of fundamental points Gassendi adopted a different position. He was clearly
in favor of a paternalistic "just" and pious monarchy working for the common good over any republican model. Through a conventional account of the original contract by which the people by common consent created the state—"true liberty only exists within the laws of society"—Gassendi made the sovereign power guarantor of private property, and emphasized the way the ruler (unlike the tyrant) was bound by natural law and moral obligation. His "Hobbesianism" was therefore no more than "Bodinianism," if anything very moderate (there were no explicit claims to absolutism). Typically, Gassendi—a Catholic priest—also disagreed with Hobbes's views on religion. It is an important example of how Hobbes's circle of friends in Paris did not amount to a circle of followers. For an argument that Gassendi's unwillingness to follow Hobbes was a consequence of his emphasis on moral freedom and civil liberty, see Lisa Sarasohn, Gassendi's Ethics, 142-54. Sarasohn also argues for a constitutionalist element within Gassendi's system, that is, a right to consent to law, which separates him from Bodin (p. 156). However, this right to consent is only implicit, and Gassendi does not offer any support for resistance to tyranny or for popular participation in legislation.

Hence Bernier should be seen as developing a Catholic libertine tradition influential throughout the seventeenth century—one represented by writers like Charron and later Gassendi—which took a Bodinian defence of royal sovereignty as point of departure for a defence of civil and intellectual liberty under the protection of the state.85 Bernier represented, however, a growing awareness of the dangers of despotism under such a system, an awareness which is best explained in relation to the two immediate contexts that mattered to him, the Mughal and the French courts. It is the latter which must be analysed as his "audience."86 Bernier's letter to Colbert, unlike others published in the same volume, was probably not composed in India, but after his return, at the end of 1670. It seems quite likely that an existing political debate in France about the nature of the monarchy of Louis XIV encouraged Bernier to deal with the political economy of Mughal India polemically,
and to construct his account as a warning to Colbert—a warning, of course, ambiguously couched in flattery since the book was dedicated to the king after all. Bernier was introduced to Colbert by one of his patrons, the poet Jean Chapelain. Sylvia Murr has argued that Bernier’s future career at the court depended on how he managed the edition of his travel account, and that in his pursuit of patronage there existed a conflict between his orientalist persona, which could be easily be accommodated within the ministerial circles represented by Colbert and Chapelain, and his alternative as a Gassendist popularizer, which connected him to his libertin friends in the Salon of Marguerite de la Sablière, men like Claude Chapelle or La Fontaine (the latter career strategy was of course more controversial, given the king’s conservative preferences). Furthermore, Murr argues, Bernier’s emphasis on the protection of private property was motivated by his opposition to Colbert’s policy of recovery of those royal domains alienated during the earlier part of the century, a policy which in 1670 was accompanied by the project (never implemented) of declaring all the lands of the realm part of the royal domain. Even if we reserve judgement about this more specific target, the rhetorical direction of the letter is unmistakable.

The fact that Bernier was writing for a European audience does not, however, mean that he was improvising his analysis, because the Mughal context was no less crucial in forming his views. As we have seen, he was responding to a perspective on Mughal affairs acquired at the Indian court, one shared by European observers like Pelsaert and Roe. Some of Bernier’s apparent exaggerations—for example, the emphasis on the lack of a commercial economy independent of the royal-aristocratic sys-

87 S. Murr, “La politique ‘au Mogol’ selon Bernier,” 248-51. It is, however, possible to argue that there was no real contradiction, not at least in Bernier’s mind, between the philosopher and the orientalist. Bernier’s letters to Colbert and Chapelain, dealing with despotism and superstition, are certainly far-reaching from a philosophical perspective. Nor was the clash between the court circles of Colbert and Chapelain and the libertines so clear-cut, as (for example) Chapelain was also a Gassendist and friend of La Mothe le Vayer. There is also evidence that over the years Bernier continued his relationship with Thévenot and other orientalists. Nicholas Dew nevertheless supports Murr’s interpretation that Bernier did not fit well the Colbert-Chapelain system of patronage, as he was not made member of any of the Parisian academies, and that in effect he chose galoisisme over erudition, mainly because he could sustain himself with the money he had brought from India. See Dew, “The Pursuit of Oriental Learning,” chp. 3.

88 Ibid., 257 and n. 90. Evidence for this “plan” are the Mémoires de Louis XIV pour l’instruction de Dauphin. Murr also argues that for Bernier the Mughal is the Aristotelian tyrant rather than the Aristotelian legitimate despot since he is a foreigner, unlike the native Hindu rulers. But the point is unsubstantiated and not convincing—the Mughals were a well-established dynasty.
tem of taxation and patronage—may be accounted for as expressions of a rhetorical elaboration for a polemical end in France, but, I would argue, they also reflected the “native” perspective at the court as opposed to the “native” point of view in the country (hence his analysis of the aristocracy and the army is more informed than his discussion of the peasant and commercial economies). In any case, it is quite obvious that a great deal of preparatory work conducted in India lay behind Bernier’s published account in Europe. Granting this, we may ask ourselves, how accurate was Bernier’s analysis in the light of modern historiography? The issue remains relevant and controversial. If we follow the argument in Irfan Habib’s highly influential The Agrarian System of Mughal India (1963; 2nd ed. 1999), it would seem that a central tradition in Indian historiography fundamentally agrees with Bernier: although the French traveler exaggerated the lack of private property in rural India, the jagir system introduced by the Mughals did lead to fiscal over-exploitation and rural decline.90 One could, however, argue that this conclusion is not coincidental, since Habib’s analysis is influenced by a Marxist tradition, and Marx’s own idea of an Asiatic mode of production was itself directly influenced by Bernier’s reading of the Mughal and Ottoman examples.90 Similarly, Perry Anderson’s neo-Marxist comparative analysis of the development of state formations in Europe and Asia emphasizes the distinction between European feudalism and oriental monarchies, supporting the basic validity of the opposition between Europe and Asia developed by Machiavelli, Bodin, Bernier, and Montesquieu, albeit denying the idea of a “static” oriental system.91 By contrast, a more recent revisionist perspective, such as that adopted by John F. Richards (The Mughal Empire, Cambridge, 1993), would be more

90 Marx’s reliance on Bernier, whom he annotated in 1853, is well known. However, the idea of an “Asiatic model” was already central to the interpretation of India by prominent British imperial writers like the utilitarian reformer James Mill, who in his polemical History of British India of 1817 (book II, chapter 3) described the Hindu idea of political authority as simplistically attached to absolute, sacred monarchy, without a proper division of functions and powers. The analysis, meant to debunk the alleged idealization of Hindu tradition by an earlier generation of colonial orientalists, notably William Jones, clearly echoes Montesquieu, and would still be influential in the twentieth-century “liberal” historiography of Mughal India, from W.H. Moreland to Barrington Moore. In effect, Bernier has influenced both liberal and Marxist interpretations of Mughal India.
91 Anderson argues, in effect, against an alternative Marxist tradition that sees feudalism as a universal stage in economic development, rather than as a specific European combination of economic and political forms.
positive towards the effects of the Mughal system upon Indian society, arguing, for example, that there were institutional checks against abuses, that the fiscal administration of the Mughal regime was remarkably efficient, that (crucially) the native rural elites or zamindars held property rights over land, and that both agriculture and market towns were actually prospering for most of the seventeenth century. The notable growth of fiscal revenues might be accounted for by the cultivation of new lands, which the authorities encouraged, rather than by sheer over-exploitation. From this perspective, the jagir crisis that did occur early in the eighteenth century was not the result of rural decline, but of mistaken policies adopted by emperor Aurangzeb. For example, his determination to conquer the Deccan at enormous cost, or the hardline position he adopted against non-Muslim religious groups, can be singled out as having placed excessive pressure on the imperial edifice created by Akbar.

This is not the place to solve this controversy, but even if we question the inevitability of the eventual decline of the Mughal system, it would be difficult to deny the cogency of Bernier’s description of its basic military-fiscal mechanisms. Although Bernier’s description was not, and could not have been, entirely accurate in the light of modern research, his analysis made sense on the basis of what could be learned at the Mughal court, especially in relation to actual differences with European institutions and legal assumptions. For example, that the largely foreign Mughal elites claimed an important proportion of land revenues seems an acceptable proposition, even though the exact figures (many historians give 50%) may remain contentious. Moreover, these political elites do not seem to have exercised any direct control over investment or production. Perhaps the more interesting point of contention concerns the intermediate class of native local elites with rights to income which Bernier neglects to discuss, the zamindars. How significant is this

92 Richards, The Mughal Empire, 190-94, 290-97.
93 Going further, Stanley Tambiah considers that while Bernier affirmed the “western stereotype” of oriental despotism, behind this superficial label he also offered a largely accurate description of the Mughal political system, one which from a modern historiographical perspective it is quite possible to re-describe as a “galactic polity,” which Tambiah considers to be a distinctive formation of South Asia. See Tambiah, “What Did Bernier Actually Say? Profiling the Mughal Empire,” Contributions to Indian Sociology 32 (1998): 361-86.
94 While the Mughal regime struggled to monitor fiscal pressure, the results of these efforts were mixed (although this may be insufficient to support the more radical claim that the only effective limit to fiscal exactions was the sheer survival of the productive classes).
Hence Habib presents the ordinary zamindar as one possible element in a “chain of local despotisms covering the whole empire” but enjoying varying degrees of autonomy: The Agrarian System (1963), 184.

96 Following Habib, Tambiah concludes that the revenue rights of zamindars were an article of property and were held in a position basically antagonistic to the central government. In this respect, Bernier’s interpretation exaggerated “on the side of absolutism” (Tambiah, “What Did Bernier Actually Say?” 375-76).

97 Habib (1999), 368-73, with particular reference to observers (other than Bernier) as diverse as the Spanish Jesuit Jerome Xavier, the Dutch factor Francisco Pelsaert, the English agent John Hawkins, and a variety of Mughal historians. Meera Nanda, who has systematically studied European accounts of the Mughal regime under Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb and assessed their reliability, considers Bernier’s account as “more analytical than descriptive,” and obsessed with the superiority of French institutions, but “considerably correct” nevertheless—especially persuasive in his interpretation of the causes for the decline of the Mughal empire. M. Nanda, European Accounts during the Reigns of Shahjahan and Aurangzeb (Kurukshetra, 1994), 27-39, 138-59.

98 John M. Hobson’s recent argument that the evidence of commercial and industrial
Interestingly, the question of the extent to which European images of oriental institutional tyranny were reasonably founded has also been debated with respect to other contemporary cases. Not all oriental monarchies were identical, of course. Bernier himself stated that the Mughal system was less corrupt and economically more prosperous than the Ottoman. However, many fundamental issues are often remarkably similar. Recently, in an analysis of the rationale behind the European image of Tsarist Russia, Marshall Poe has concluded that, while exaggerated, the image of a monarchical power which was far less limited, legally or institutionally, than that of any European king, was largely accurate. An altogether different question is whether the explanation provided by early modern travelers—that the Russians were naturally more “servile”—is at all adequate, and here, unsurprisingly, Poe argues against it. Instead, the nature of Muscovite power, with a service nobility under direct royal control and few limitations on royal claims to the resources of the land, can be seen as an adaptive strategy which made a great deal of sense from an imperial perspective given the traditions available and the conditions prevailing.

The comparison of Bernier’s account of Mughal India with another key French travel narrative of the period, Jean Chardin’s extraordinarily systematic description of Persia, only confirms that these observers were not simply applying a blanket European category of despotism without regard for the historical particularity of each case. At first sight, the Huguenot merchant-antiquarian Chardin (who, incidentally, was a friend of Bernier and was probably aware of the latter’s discussion of India when composing his own account of Persia a few years later) seems to provide us with an obvious use of the “Aristotelian” concept of despotism to describe the Safavid monarchy. As he writes,
At present the government of Persia is monarchical, despotical and absolute: all authority rests with a single man, who is the sovereign head in both spiritual and temporal matters, and in all respects the master of the life and the goods of his subjects. There is certainly nowhere in the world a sovereign as absolute as the king of Persia, as his commandments are always exactly executed, without regard for their substance or the circumstances of things.\footnote{Chardin, \textit{Voyage}, 1711, 2:211. From chapter 2, “De la nature de Gouvernement,” in the general section “Description de Gouvernement politique, militaire et civil des Persans.”}

However, although Chardin also refers to the fact that in Europe “the authority of the laws guarantees the life and the property of each individual,” on closer inspection it turns out that he argues his case in a way that actually contradicts any idea that he may be generalizing about “oriental regimes,” as Bernier had done. In fact, he is making his case on very specific and limited grounds, and in relation to the Safavid monarchy of the seventeenth century only. To begin with, the royal will is more arbitrarily and personally executed in Persia than in the Ottoman state, where the sultan is more likely to consult judges (who are clerics) when exercising the higher powers of justice. This unique Persian despotism is largely a result, not of political necessity, but of the Shi’ite doctrine by which the authority of the dynasty is derived directly from the prophetic authority of Muhammad, a position which leaves no room for any separation of religious and political authorities.\footnote{Ibid., chp. 1: “Des sentiments des Persans sur le droit du Gouvernement.”} This theocratic doctrine, in turn, although it can generally be traced back to ancient times (including the Old Testament), is in its extreme form less peculiar to Persia than to the Safavid dynasty, which emerged there in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and which under Shah Abbas managed to subjugate the old military aristocracy by creating a new ruling class (largely by enslaving, and enlisting, Georgian and Armenian Christians). In other words, it is historical circumstance which has created the conditions for this extreme despotism—we are rather far from the generalizations about the slavish nature of Asian peoples proposed by Aristotle. Perhaps most decisively, this despotism, the Persian king’s arbitrary control of the lives and goods of
his subjects, relates exclusively to the great lords of the court ("seulement a l’égard des grands de la cour"), and not to the common people:

for the rest, we should not believe that the government of Persia is despotic and arbitrary, as it is more properly called military (militaire). Persia has for over the last thousand years been a conquered country, that is, since the Muslims destroyed the Persian monarchy. . . . Now, everybody knows that military governments are everywhere arbitrary and absolute.103

A monarchy of conquest is a general phenomenon; the despotism of the Safavid dynasty is rather unique. To call oriental regimes “tyrannical” seems justified in relation to Persia and Turkey only to some extent. Outside some extraordinary situations, in which reason of state permits the king to proceed against his governors and servants disregarding any legal process, “the Persian government is regulated by civil laws,” and Chardin goes as far as saying that while the condition of the grandees is extremely uncertain, “the condition of the people is much more secure and gentle than in many Christian States.”104 As a corollary, there is no simple royal control of all the rents from the land either, as Chardin, with more discrimination than either Botero or Bernier, distinguishes lands whose revenues belong to “the state,” those which belong to “the royal domain,” those which belong to “the church,” and finally those which belong “to particulars.”105

The comparison between Chardin and Bernier makes it obvious that the philosophical travelers of the second half of the seventeenth century were using the category of despotism or equivalent formulations rather creatively, not in order to develop a common “European” position, but in order to interpret realities that were empirically diverse (and curiously Chardin, who unlike Bernier adopts the actual word “despotism,” is more careful not to generalize). The fact that Chardin and Bernier were in communication with each other, and that the merchant-antiquarian adopted the doctor-philosopher as a possible model, makes their subtly different approaches to the theme especially revealing.106 Chardin

103 Ibid., 212.
104 Ibid.
105 Ibid., 244-48, chp. 6: “Des fonds de terre et des rentes.”
106 The connection between Bernier and Chardin deserves more investigation. Both were together in Paris in 1670-1671, when Bernier was seeing his work on Mughal India through the press. Before leaving again for Persia in August 1671, Chardin also published his Couronnement de Soleïmaan, an account of the reign of the new Shah from 1666 to 1669, with the printer Claude Barbin, who had also been Bernier’s publisher. Although in 1671 Chardin chose to publish a historical work comparable to Bernier’s account of the civil wars in Mughal India, his Voyage of 1686-1711 would be radically different,
including both a detailed itinerary, or travel journal, and a systematic ethnography of an exotic civilization (one which, in its coverage and detail, went beyond Bernier’s thematic letters).

Chardin did, however, compare the effects of despotism to the situation in Europe in general when discussing the Persian temperament. He declared that Persian men, while civil, never act out of a sense of generosity, that is, for the sake of virtue: since their minds and hearts are (like their bodies) subject to arbitrary power, they only know fear and hope.

John Locke’s case is more complex. He knew Bernier personally (they met in France in the 1670s) and was a careful reader of his travel account. It would seem that the bulk of this reading was done in Montpellier in 1676 after meeting the author (Lennon, *The Battle*, 157-60). At a later stage, Locke received a copy of Bernier’s *Abregé* of Gassendi’s philosophy. However, to the extent that they are known, Locke’s notes on Bernier mainly concern his account of Hindu religion—Locke was obviously attracted

Neither the audacious Bernier nor the cautious Chardin sought to become direct contributors to a *theoretical* debate about despotism among political thinkers. It was through their readers, especially Montesquieu, that this eventually took place. That Montesquieu’s target was often
the same French monarchy which had been the object of Bernier’s concerns, and which had forced Chardin into exile, made the move natural.

*Despotism and the Monarchy of France: Montesquieu’s Paradigm*

Bernier’s strategy made its key impact in the writings of Montesquieu, but only after the political climate had changed radically throughout the last three decades of the seventeenth century, both within France, with increasing opposition to what was seen as the arbitrary and costly rule of Louis XIV, and abroad, given the growing fear (a fear only put to rest after the war of Spanish Succession) that the French king posed a general threat to the security of other European rulers. Although opposition to the French monarchy came from many quarters, including mainstream conservatives like the pious bishop Fénelon, Huguenot refugees in Holland and England played an important role in articulating a critical discourse with constitutional undertones, and what we might call “Protestant republicanism,” often in alliance with “Catholic libertinism,” emerged as crucial in focusing the debate on the danger that France might not be, as Bodin thought, a perfect absolute monarchy, but rather, because absolutist, intolerant and despotic.109 Thus Montesquieu’s great project, which involved developing the image of despotism as a foil to Bodinian-Hobbesian definitions of state sovereignty, did not require a sudden analytical departure, but responded to a number of issues which were being debated in the latter years of Louis XIV.

We may take the anonymous anti-despotical tract *Les soupirs de la France esclave* (Amsterdam, 1689), commonly attributed to the Oratorian priest Michel Le Vassor as representative of the new climate.110 Here the French were presented as amongst the most subjected people in Europe,
living under a regime equivalent to the tyranny of the Turk.\footnote{111} Having lost its ancient liberty (here the pamphlet echoed Hotman’s sixteenth-century analysis, but updated it with reference to the rule of Richelieu, Mazarin, and Louis XIV), the French nation was under the arbitrary rule of a king who considered himself above all human laws, who imposed his opinions against natural reason (a reference to the prohibition of Copernicanism), and who claimed the lives and goods of his subjects according to his will.\footnote{112} “Puissance despotique” was defined as “pouvoir arbitraire, absolu et sans limits,” to which the author opposed the ideal of a moderate monarchy where the king was subject to public laws, and where sovereignty was shared with representative assemblies and judicial bodies.\footnote{113} This idea of a restoration of an “ancient” regime of liberty was clearly inspired by the restoration of a similar regime in England after the recent revolution, whilst the perceived alternative, despotism, could be presented as inherently unstable and generally ruinous (although the survival of the Turkish state remained a mystery). Le Vassor found inspiration in Bernier’s letter to Colbert for his attack on the devastation brought upon France by the “tyranny” of Louis XIV, even claiming (probably apocryphally) that Bernier had written against oriental monarchies in reaction to a specific request to advise Colbert on how the Mughal administered all the lands of the realm, presumably so that Louis XIV could adopt the same system and claim “tous les fonds et toutes les terres de France” as his direct dominion.\footnote{114}
We can also consider in some detail the way Pierre Bayle came to the issue of despotism in his *Reponse aux questions d’un provincial* (Rotterdam, 1704), in a manner that suggests that he was responding to an existing discussion.\textsuperscript{115} The long-running issue was of course that of deciding between the disadvantages of absolute sovereignty (puissance absolue) and those of shared sovereignty (puissance partagée). Pierre Bayle had been perceived by some readers of the first edition of his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1696) as a defender of monarchical absolutism, but his position was more complex, or at least had become so by the time he composed the *Reponse*.\textsuperscript{116} Here Bayle took a Hobbesian perspective as his
starting point, but cleverly shifted the issue to a sceptical approach towards the empirical evidence for oriental despotism. On the basis of the influential account by the English consul Paul Rycaut, Bayle actually questioned that the Ottoman sultan was an absolute despot, noting that he did rule through laws after all. He was not, however, suggesting that oriental despotism did not exist, or that the issues were totally inapplicable to France, as a superficial, “Bodinian” reading of this first letter might suggest (the continuation of the letter made his position more clear). Bayle’s intelligent answer was, rather, that despotism should not be seen as an absolute category, but existed in degrees.

To assert or deny the existence of despotism in particular cases—to deplore or praise the Chinese system, for example—one needed to do more than read whatever accounts were available, since most were often quite superficial. Crucially, a similar scepticism towards easy generalizations should operate when discussing whether a moderate, mixed government inevitably led to political chaos (a key argument for reason-of-state absolutism): were one to consider Poland, or the Dutch Republic, one would reach very different conclusions. However difficult finding this constitutional balance seemed, the bottom line was that the evidence of human nature did not recommend, as Hobbes would have it, placing oneself blindly at the mercy of the goodwill of a single monarch, but rather the opposite.117 His own experience was that Holland compared favorably to France: “soyez assuré, Monsieur, qu’il n’y a rien de plus doux que la liberté.”118

Bayle’s discussion is symptomatic of the new climate not only thematically, but also methodologically. While he had started by questioning the extreme caricature of the despotism of the Ottomans, he concluded by inviting his readers to consider carefully the quality of their evidence before accepting the idea of a benevolent despotism in China. In this way, with remarkable even-handedness, he opened up the problem of orientalism in the definition of despotism.119 This crucial

décriées en Angleterre, et que le parti de la liberté du peuple l’emporte, il y a des Anglais qui ont cru remarquer que vous favorisiez trop ceux deux sentimens, et ils ont voulu conclure que vous condamniez la dernière révolution.” Bayle, Le Vassor was quite sure, had only meant to refute “some seditious spirits,” which would be all right, provided he also openly denounced tyranny and arbitrary power. See E. Gigas, ed., Choix de la correspondance, 507-9. The evidence is insufficient to establish whether Le Vassor was, with this and similar letters, instrumental in encouraging Bayle’s shift of emphasis in the Réponse.

117 Réponse, 605.
118 Ibid., 615.
119 Although Bayle’s main example for his discussion of despotism was the Ottoman Empire, he was also familiar with Bernier’s writings. Bayle and Bernier had, in fact, met
move from analytical to empirical issues would come to dominate the debates of the eighteenth century, with Montesquieu self-consciously creating an ideal type on the basis of a wide range of empirical cases, and critics from Voltaire to Anquetil-Duperron questioning the validity of this type, often by referring back to issues of empirical validity. That is, the question became whether it was indeed the case that the Ottoman sultan, or the rulers of Persia, India, and China, denied their subjects any property of the land, or ruled arbitrarily rather than through traditional laws.

Taken together, the Soupirs and Bayle’s letters clearly established a link between the issue of oriental despotism and the European debate about limited versus absolute monarchies, with the constitution of France as the key problem. This was of course the intellectual agenda to which Charles-Louis de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755) set out to give a sophisticated answer, analytically and empirically. His analytical position was dominated by the distinction between a moderate monarchy and despotism. As Michael Mosher has argued, Montesquieu was not exactly opposed to the Bodinian idea of sovereignty, as he acknowledged that in a monarchy, however moderate, the ultimate source of authority could not be shared, and was located in the will of the monarch. However, he rejected the Bodinian conclusion that the sovereign had to control directly all the powers of the state, emphasizing instead the possibility of distributing powers and, in particular, the

120 On the debate concerning the nature of Ottoman government in particular see T. Kaiser, “The Evil Empire? The Debate on Turkish Despotism in Eighteenth-Century French Political Culture,” *Journal of Modern History* 72 (2000): 6-34; and Adi Cirakman, *From the “Terror of the World” to the “Sick Man of Europe”: European Images of Ottoman Empire and Society from the Sixteenth Century to the Nineteenth* (New York, 2002), esp. chp. 3. The account by Paul Rycart was highly influential in this debate, playing a role similar to Bernier for India.

The desirability of dividing the legislative from the executive, as exemplified by his positive assessment of the constitution of England. Arguably, England, with its powerful commons, was less a monarchy than a republic disguised as a monarchy. The fact that in a “real” monarchy such as France the king did have ultimate discretion over the promulgation of laws made the regime vulnerable to the erosion of the powers of intermediate bodies. This is why the issue of despotism became so central. In the same way that a mixed monarchy hid a republican principle, a sovereign monarch hid a possible despot, one whose agency could eventually circumvent the limitations imposed by customary constraints. Intermediate judicial bodies like the French parlements (where Montesquieu had served) were perhaps resilient, but could ultimately be destroyed by the sovereign; neither the remnants of an aristocratic ethic of honor, nor even the powerful influence of a temperate climate, could always guarantee moderation.

This argument only makes sense if one adopts a dynamic understanding of Montesquieu’s theory—that is, one which accepts that despotism, monarchy, and republics are not self-enclosed systems, despite the fact that each has its separate conditions and principles, a distinctive esprit. Despotisms are maintained by fear, moderate monarchies by aristocratic honor, and republics by virtue, but the crucial point is that a monarchy might evolve historically to become either a republic (as seems to have happened in England) or a despotism (as might yet happen in France). A concomitant consequence is that Montesquieu’s concept of despotism is not determined geographically, despite what a superficial reading of some isolated passages might suggest. Albeit neither climate nor tradition favor despotism in Europe, the historical evolution of the French Monarchy and other countries, with a steady erosion of political liberty, suggests that the possibility exists. Whether the East could evolve towards a system of law and liberty when the negative influence of climate is so powerful and despotism so pervasive is something that Montesquieu seems to doubt. Climate is “the major reason for the liberty of Europe and the servitude of Asia,” and indeed, “liberty never increases in Asia, whereas in Europe it increases or decreases according to circumstances.”

The existence of great plains in Asia also favors the formation of great empires, whilst in Europe “the natural divisions

---

122 De l’esprit des loix, book 17, chp. 3. I quote from The Spirit of the Laws, ed. A. Colher, B. Miller, and H. Stone (Cambridge, 1989), 280. The explanation is as follows: “in Asia [which lacks a temperate zone] the strong and weak nations face each other; the brave and active warrior peoples are immediately adjacent to effeminate, lazy and timid peo-
form many medium-sized states in which the government of laws is not incompatible with the maintenance of the state,” and in reality “without laws this state falls into decadence and becomes inferior to all others.”123 The variability of Europe implies that climate alone is not a sufficient explanation. In effect, Montesquieu is saying that a number of conditions—history and tradition, climate and temperament—lie behind the development of diverse types of government; not all types are adequate for all societies. Europe has benefited, by climate and by history, from the development of feudal monarchies, which protected civil and political liberty whilst upholding successful states—that is, from its moderate, limited government executives. Despite this historical bias there has also been an erosion of political liberty (as a result of the practices of absolute monarchies), which is bringing much of Europe closer to despotism. Spain has already fallen—only religion there stands in the way of despotism—and if France loses its judicial parlements and its independent nobility, it might follow suit. The two dangers for monarchies are to suffer a great conquest, in Europe now unlikely, or “a long abuse of power,” which seems less remote.124 Since the transition from a moderate monarchy to a moderate republic is less traumatic than a fall into despotism, a possible remedy is to strive for a variant version of the English model, a limited, constitutional monarchy with powers clearly divided: “when legislative power is united with executive power in a single person or in a single body of magistracy, there is no liberty.”125 The power to judge must also be independent, and indeed for Montesquieu European monarchies like France are at least moderate due to the existence of a separate judicial authority: they enjoy a “spirit of liberty” even though (unlike England) they do not have liberty as their main aim.126 The opposite alternative is pretty awful: “Among the Turks, where the three powers are united in the person of the sultan, an atrocious despotism reigns.”127 Thus the temptation to imitate ori-
Oriental states that seem successful, like the large, prosperous, bureaucratically unified and peace-loving China praised by so many European writers (including Bernier), is a dangerous mistake: hence it becomes crucial to deny that the mighty kingdom is anything but a variant form of despotism, with most of its faults.128

It has long been known, from the research by Muriel Dodds, that Montesquieu relied heavily on travel accounts to substantiate his analysis of Eastern regimes. The extent to which he found inspiration in these sources, rather than sheer raw material for a pre-defined image of despotism, has remained a controversial issue.129 For his discussions of Turkey, Persia, India, and China, the most important examples of oriental despotic regimes, Montesquieu turned to a variety of writers like the British consul Paul Rycaut, the French travelers Jean Chardin and François Bernier, or the description of China by the Jesuit father du Halde, all easily available in French.130 There can be little doubt that Montesquieu read these sources selectively in order to find evidence of, and about, despotism.131 However, he also considered the accuracy of his sources essential to his ability to make a valid argument about the historical conditions he sought to identify. He did, on occasion, contrast conflicting sources, for example in his discussion of China, which required additional care given that his judgement seemed to overturn the popular image of the kingdom as prosperous, orderly, and subject to law.132 Even here he could argue that the Jesuits themselves, largely responsible for this positive image in works like Jean Baptiste du Halde’s

128 Ibid., 126-28. China is, due to its climate, which encourages great human fertility, less corrupt than it should be, but still “a despotistic state whose principal is fear.”
129 M. Dodds, Les récits des voyages, sources de L’Esprit des Lois de Montesquieu (Paris, 1929), emphasizing the care and precision with which Montesquieu sought to document all his statements. It can be contrasted to E. Carcassonne, “La Chine dans l’esprit des lois,” Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France (Paris, 1924), emphasizing Montesquieu’s highly selective use of information in order to confirm a prejudice. The topic has also been discussed in Baddredine Kassem, Décadence et absolutisme dans l’œuvre de Montesquieu (Paris, 1960); R. Shackleton, “Asia as Seen by the French Enlightenment,” in Essays on Montesquieu, 231-41; David Young, “Montesquieu’s View of Despotism and His Use of Travel Literature,” Review of Politics 40 (1978): 392-405, offers a brief, but sensible, discussion, reaching valid conclusions. More recently, see also Osterhammel, Die Entzauberung Asiens, 275-84.
130 P. Ricaut, Histoire de l’état present de l’empire Ottoman, traduit de l’anglais... (Amsterdam, 1670); J. Chardin, Voyage en Perse et autres lieux de l’Orient, 10 vols. (2nd ed., Amsterdam, 1711); P. du Halde, Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique et physique de l’empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie Chinoise, 4 vols. (Paris, 1735).
131 Young, “Montesquieu’s View,” 400-3.
132 China had been idealized in the sixteenth century mainly by religious writers who believed in a powerful “Catholic” monarchy and a paternalistic, highly-regulated social
Description de l’Empire de la Chine (1735), on a close reading of their letters often revealed China’s despotism. If necessary, Montesquieu could also turn to alternative accounts by merchants, like the recent narrative of George Anson’s British expedition. Montesquieu was aware that the authority of his opinions rested on the authority of the travel writers he used and often made the source of his information explicit, in the text or in the footnotes. Like most educated contemporaries, he had read many of these accounts as part of his general philosophical education, either as individual narratives or through collections, like the Recueil des voyages qui ont servi à l’établissement de la Compagnie des Indes (2nd ed. Amsterdam, 1725). He was discriminating, using when necessary the accounts of missionaries and merchants, but relying where possible on detailed accounts by fairly recent, well-educated, and independent authors, of which Bernier remained a key model.

Few of these travel writers were concerned with the definition of despotism, but many were keen to point out what, from a European perspective, was missing in oriental regimes, and some, like Bernier, sought to establish a fundamental dichotomy. The influence of these readings in creating a composite vision was often pervasive. Bernier was thus only one of Montesquieu’s authorities when documenting, for example, the effects of the hot climate of India in generating indolence amongst locals and foreigners. Chardin was the source for the assertion that there was no council of state in Persia, whilst the important statement that “of all despotic governments none is more oppressive to itself than the one whose prince declares himself owner of all the land and heir to all his subjects” did not even require support from Bernier’s letters—hence all China lacked was Catholicism. Bodin, and then Botero, initially inherited this view of a prosperous and well-regulated kingdom, but later became more critical. Throughout the seventeenth century the defence of an optimistic image of China by the Jesuits became part of their defence of their controversial strategy of accommodating Confucianism (a policy, that is, controversial within the Catholic Church). It is apparent that Jesuit publicists were under pressure to water down the more critical assessments by many of their observers in China.

Montesquieu mentioned as example the evidence from the letters of Father Parennin in 1726 (from Lettres édifiantes et curieuses, vol. 18). In general, the Jesuits, from Ricci to du Halde, offered a wider range of views of China, and were more nuanced in their assessment, than has sometimes been acknowledged.

“Our men of commerce, far from giving us an idea of the same kind of virtue of which our missionaries speak, can rather be consulted about the banditry of the mandarins. I also call to witness the great man, Lord Anson,” in The Spirit of the Laws, 127.
ter to Colbert, because Montesquieu could use Rycaut’s discussion of
the Turkish empire to support the same point. 135

While the concept of despotism (as well as the debate about the
monarchy in France) pre-existed Montesquieu’s adoption of it, he crys-
tallized a new, systematic formulation around the Tacitean principles
of fear and corruption, one which shifted the grounds of the Aristotelian
and Bodinian legacy in the light of his reading of Roman, European,
and Oriental history. It is impossible to decide whether Tacitus would
have been more, or less, decisive than Bernier in forming Montesquieu’s
views of despotism. Probably the Roman writer most helped him define
what despotism was, Bernier where it was, and the history of France,
why it mattered. The precise extent to which these readings exerted an
inspirational influence is difficult to elucidate, but the evidence of the
earlier, more literary Persian letters (1721), in which the domestic, sexual
despotism of the Persian lord in his harem eventually leads to a col-
lapse of his authority, strongly suggests that Montesquieu’s metaphorical
understanding of the inner logic of despotism, clearly influenced by
his reading of travel accounts like Jean Chardin’s, preceded his more
detailed, analytical work on the historical conditions for a universal type
of government. 136 In the Persian Letters Montesquieu also announced
the key concern behind The Spirit of the Laws, the fact that European monar-
chies were fundamentally unstable and were bound to “always degenerate
into either despotism or a republic,” since sovereignty could not be
equally shared between the people and their king. 137 It seems therefore

135 From a crucial chapter discussing laws relative to despotic government (V, 14):
see ibid., 59-63. For other examples see Young, “Montesquieu’s View,” 396-401.
136 Grossrichard, The Sultan’s Court, 26-52, argues for the basic continuity between the
despotism of the Persian Letters and that of the The Spirit of the Laws. The sources for the
Persian Letters deserve further study. It is clear that Montesquieu had read Chardin and
Tavernier, which he mentions, as well as Marana’s Turkish Spy, his most obvious model.
Some critics have argued that the influence of Christian polemical writings against Islam,
like Humphrey Pridaun’s Vie de l’imposteur Mahomet (Paris, 1698), was of equal significance
(Kasem, Décadence et absolutisme, 133-44). It is true that Montesquieu declared his pref-
erence for Christianity over Islam on “rational” grounds, “for it is much more evident
to us that a religion [Christianity] should soften the mores of men that it is that a reli-
gion is true”; hence “moderate government is better suited to the Christian religion, and
despotic government to Mahammedanism” (The Spirit of the Laws, 24, 3-4, 461-2). However,
Montesquieu could also be critical of Christian institutions (like the Inquisition), and in
general he did not rely on the analysis of religion for his definition of despotism.
137 Lettres persanes, n. 102. Montesquieu also noted that in this inevitable clash between
prince and people, the former, as head of the army, usually had the advantage. Montesquieu
likely that Montesquieu worked out the climatic and geographical explanations for despotism around his previous general understanding of a negative *esprit*, one in which the pervasive fear generated by arbitrary power excluded both honor and virtue, and led to self-destruction. Montesquieu’s appeal to climatic explanations (which he naïvely assumed to be his original idea) is less a sign of a deterministic belief, which I doubt existed, than an attempt to rationalize the perceived uniqueness of European traditions of liberty.

Did this lead to “orientalism” in a Saidian sense? It was obviously his desire to reach a simple principle for each system that led Montesquieu to his most “orientalist” behaviour, not perhaps in the sense that he was trying to justify any European imperialist undertaking (he plainly was not), but in his willingness to create an intellectual image which served a rhetorical aim at the expense of empirical realities. By trying to unlock a single key for each system of government, one may argue, he forced the interpretation of specific observations to fit in. What mattered to him was not understanding China, but justifying its classification as a despotic regime ruled by fear. We may add that Montesquieu obviously felt passionate contempt for despotism, and for this reason non-European societies could not simply be an object for scientific study. However, as Sharon Krause has emphasized, ultimately Montesquieu’s aim was not to create a gulf between the despotic East and Europe, but rather to state that despotic tendencies were universal. Montesquieu was not claiming that all non-European regimes were, as despotic, identical, but he sought to create an abstract type in which the nature of despotism could be clearly understood, and from which each case (European or non-European) could be judged. His selective reading of sources was not therefore motivated by a supposed desire to “preserve the strict integrity” of his ideal types. The aim was to use the universal types as an interpretative framework whose validity would rest

---


139 Ibid., 250.
on empirical observations but not depend on the contingencies of each individual case.\textsuperscript{140}

\textit{Despotism and Imperialism in Enlightened Debates}

It is clear from the preceding discussion that Montesquieu was not the first to imply that despotism defined a system of rule, and that it should therefore (unlike tyranny) be seen as a structural feature of certain polities. Travelers like Fletcher and Bernier had already made this clear, and of course Aristotle had appealed to the “servile nature” of Asians to explain despotism in the East. Montesquieu’s originality consisted in the creation a sophisticated explanatory framework for despotism. This, in turn, allowed him to establish the definition that would dominate future discussions, and it was mainly for, or against, Montesquieu, that debate ensued. This debate is a legacy which, however briefly, we need to consider, as it illustrates both the uses to which the idea of despotism was put to in a new imperial context, and the fact that the Enlightenment may be best characterized not by the adoption of an all-encompassing theory of oriental inferiority, but by the existence of a heated debate about evidence and prejudice.

Even though in his \textit{Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline} (1734) Montesquieu had made it clear that “it would be an error to believe that there has ever been in the world a human authority that is despotic in all its aspects,” Voltaire, as we saw earlier, soon accused him of having invented a fantasy, and he set out to redeem oriental civilizations from this monstrosity. He argued, for example, that the large areas cultivated in these extensive empires could not really remain cultivated were the regimes as despotic as was claimed. He also noted that the separation between law and religion was meaningless in a Muslim context—there was therefore a legal limitation to arbitrary power in Muslim countries.\textsuperscript{141} Voltaire’s concern might have been in large part political—he did after all believe in legal absolutism,

\textsuperscript{140} In this I agree with Krause, ibid., 249-55. Krause also makes the point that the East/West divide was drawn by Montesquieu only to be elided, since his target was a careful criticism of France (a strategy he could have learned from Bernier). I am less convinced that his remarks on despotism were also directed at the Christian Church (ibid., 253). As a “liberal Catholic” with private philosophical views, Montesquieu was very critical of religious intolerance and of historical accretions to the gospel, but his attitude to Christianity was also often explicitly and rationally positive.

\textsuperscript{141} Voltaire, “Dialogues between A B C,” 97.
and defended the *thèse royale* against ecclesiastical and aristocratic pretensions—but it is clear that his claim that Europeans were both arrogant and ignorant when assuming a universal truth without considering the antiquity and importance of Chinese achievements was also meant to be taken seriously as an empirical statement.\textsuperscript{142} This sense of world-historical relativism dominated one of his most ambitious historical-philosophical works, the *Essai sur les moeurs et l’esprit des nations* (1756), where many of his criticisms of *De l’esprit des lois* found expression.\textsuperscript{143} However, Voltaire’s use of primary sources was often more limited and superficial than Montesquieu’s. He relied on the same Jesuit writers (such as Father du Halde) for his positive assessment of China, and had to concede the limitations of modern Chinese technology when du Halde did so (or, for India, a parallel case, when Bernier forced him to). What he failed to do was to scrutinize and compare sources carefully.\textsuperscript{144} Paradoxically, one could argue that Voltaire was in the end the more “orientalist” writer, at least to the extent that “orientalism” is about idealization, positive or negative. Voltaire’s most pro-Chinese views were also his most “rhetorical” passages, those in which he was clearly targeting European sense of superiority in religion and civilization rather than trying to understand “the other.” Over time, Voltaire came to retract somewhat his positive interpretation of China.

Despite its rhetorical brilliance, therefore, Voltaire’s attack is far less interesting than the one conducted by Abraham-Hyacinte Anquetil Duperron (1731-1805), mainly because the latter was capable of challenging Montesquieu by upstaging him on empirical grounds. His attack came after the concept of despotism had been widely used and transformed by other Enlightenment writers. Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger, for example, one of his targets, had given historical depth to the concept by analyzing, in his *Recherches sur l’origine du despotisme oriental* (1761), the relation between religious fear and despotic political authority in the early history of mankind.\textsuperscript{145} Although Anquetil-Duperron was primarily


\textsuperscript{144} Consider, for example, his acceptance of the *Ezour-Veidam*, a Jesuit forgery, as evidence for the primitive despotism of India in his *Philosophie de l’Histoire* (1765).

\textsuperscript{145} Some contemporary physiocrats, on the other hand, less in conformity with the spirit of Montesquieu, developed a distinction between legal despotism and arbitrary
despotism, in effect seeking to return to a “neo-Bodinian” defence of monarchies, one in which the limits to the exercise of sovereign power were set by a kind of natural law rather than by human agency, and the good despots became “enlightened.” China could thus be claimed by Quesnay as a positive model of absolute monarchical rule in accordance to economic and social laws. For more details see Venturi, “Oriental Despotism” and Richter, “Despotism.”

146 Venturi, ibid., Anquetil-Duperron’s voyage to India (1755-1761) was originally motivated by his antiquarian research into ancient Persian and brahminical religions.

147 “Sur le rapport de ces voyageurs, de l’abus de l’autorité devenue pour un temps arbitraire on a fait une espèce particulière de gouvernement existant sous le nom de despotisme: point de loix fixes, point de propriétés dans ce gouvernement”: Legislation Orientale (Amsterdam, 1778, p. v). For a particular criticism of Bernier, see ibid., 134-42.

It is important to note that Anquetil-Duperron criticized both the superficiality of the travelers and the biased and imperfect use that writers like Montesquieu made of their accounts: “Cependant les publicistes, sur le rapport, mal compris, des voyageurs, forment un système de despotisme qui n’existe réellement nulle part” (ibid., 2). 

148 Ibid., 310: “Les anglois, dans le Bengale, prétendent jouir des droits des princes qu’ils ont dépouillés. Il faut donc représenter les princes comme maitres absolu.” For an important example of this early use of Montesquieu’s concept of despotism to legitimize the British conquest of India, see Alexander Dow, History of Indostan, 3 vols. (1766-1772).

149 Edmund Burke, like Anquetil-Duperron, idealized the legislative capacity of the Indians, and attacked Hastings for his opportunistic reliance on the idea of the inevitability of despotism in the orient. His alternative was a paternalistic colonial rule based on native traditions. What is not clear is the extent to which he truly departed from the
Anquetil-Duperron’s claims relied not only on the traveler’s observation of current practices, but also on the antiquarian’s understanding of the ancient civilizations of the East on the basis of their own written traditions. This strategy, however, which in some ways gave depth to his position, could be vulnerable to the counter-attack that what may have been the case centuries earlier was no longer the best approach to interpreting the present, a problem Voltaire had also encountered when having to acknowledge that the superiority of India and China in science and technology was mostly a thing of the past. In addition, there were also those aspiring philosophers willing to travel in order to re-assert the thesis of despotism, like the French naturalist Pierre Sonnerat, who after traveling extensively in the 1770s, like a new Bernier, concluded that political despotism and the hot climate were the reasons why Indian technology had stagnated, before turning to China in order to disparage it as a model of civilization. Hence, the debate about the reality of despotism, and in particular about the existence or not, outside Europe, of private property, an independent legal system, and an idea of political liberty, was bound to continue, often involving the problematic relationship between antiquarianism and contemporary observation.

Anquetil-Duperron’s avowed position of Hastings. See P.J. Marshall, The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, vols. 1-5 (India, 1774-1783), and vol. 6 (India, 1786-1788). Anquetil-Duperron was in some ways more anti-British than anti-colonialist. As well as a French patriot and a monarchist, he was prominent as a devout (if rather unorthodox) Catholic, opposed to the excesses of the French revolution, and indeed claiming that his restoration of an understanding of ancient Zoroastrianism was part of a new anti-sceptical Christian apologetic program, one which would support the historical claims of the Bible. See R. Schwab, Vie d’Anquetil-Duperron, suivi des Usages civils et religieux des Parsees, (Paris, 1934), and Guido Abbattista, ed., “Introduzione” to Anquetil-Duperron, Considérations philosophiques, historiques et géographiques sur les deux mondes (1780-1804) (Pisa, 1993).

Sonnerat, Voyage des Indes Orientales et à la Chine (1782). Sonnerat, who sought to offer a systematic account of India according to the methods of observation and classification of natural science and antiquarianism, is discussed by Catherine Weinberger-Thomas, “Les mystères du Védā. Spéculations sur le texte sacré des anciens brames au siècle des Lumières,” in Parasartha 7 (1983): 177-231. While Sonnerat updated the empirical grounds for Montesquieu’s views on oriental despotism, most controversially in China, he also came to support Voltaire’s arguments about the antiquity of Indian civilization and its ancient “natural” monotheism.
For example, and not surprisingly, British colonial writers in India inherited many of these problems, with the additional urgency of needing to decide on how to rule the new imperial domain. They remained naturally divided about the nature of despotism. Those most sympathetic to Indian accomplishments, like William Jones, tended to agree that the despotism of violent conquerors had crushed a promising civilization, but also emphasized the survival of a valid native tradition. Appealing to the idea of legal, non-arbitrary despotism, they sought to rule India according to native custom by restoring the elements of order and moderation (including traditional rights to property) implicit in the ancient legal systems, suitably clarified. These traditions might not bring political liberty, but were the only adequate means to cater for the needs and aspirations of oriental peoples. However, for writers more sceptical about India’s ancient achievements, like the reform-minded utilitarian James Mill, despotism was already implicit in the earlier Hindu traditions, and there was little one could accomplish by resurrecting Vedic culture in its ancient form. Indeed, the orientalist programme of Jones, inspired by Burkean conservatism, they denounced as perpetuating the despotism of custom (as in England Burkean conservatism also perpetuated the despotism of common law), and hence as denying any opportunity for improving the condition of the new colonial subjects. Property rights and the rule of law could not be restored; they needed to be created.153

Inevitably, the issue of the supposed despotic character of these non-European traditions continues to haunt, and divide, historians today. For our purposes, the important conclusion is the emergence of what we may call an early-modern cultural structure by which the process of interaction between observers and thinkers, once established, tended to recur: hence the traveler sent reports to Europe, the historian-cosmographer selected and generalized, a debate could ensue, and future travelers might carry new concepts abroad, or perhaps even seek to travel in order to disprove particular formulations. It was the awareness of the crucial methodological issues underlining this dialogue between travelers and philosophers, or between evidence and generalization, which defined the relative maturity of the orientalism of the Enlightenment. Indeed, the early-modern dialogue between travelers and men of learning

should be considered as an important element in the development of a modern discourse on comparative politics.

Travel Writing and the History of Political Thought

A broad understanding of the history of the concept of oriental despotism allows us to conclude that the profound logic behind its pervasive appeal had to do not only with a certain consensus about the need to limit monarchical power in Europe within legal, institutional constraints, but also with the genuine perception of the actual existence of an undesirable alternative in the East, although there were important differences of opinion as to how truly different this alternative model was, or whether particular examples like China belonged to this category. Perhaps the most interesting consequence of the preceding scrutiny of the contributions by Botero, Bernier, and Montesquieu is that a consideration of the influence of travel writers and cosmographers on the evolution of the concept does not merely help explain the empirical roots of the European idea of despotism, but in fact also helps assess in a novel fashion the significance of apparent discontinuities in the formulations of the great theorists.

In a traditional history-of-ideas analysis such as that conducted by Melvin Richter, the fundamental similarity between the Aristotelian formulation of despotism as a legitimate form of monarchical government which applies to oriental peoples due to their servile nature, and Montesquieu’s latter elaboration of despotism as a basic type of government which also excludes an element of political liberty, is interrupted by the shift of emphasis towards the idea of conquest, dispossession, and slavery in Bodin, influencing subsequent discussions in Grotius, Hobbes, Pufendorf, and Locke.154 In the new post-Bodinian formulation, enthusiastically appropriated by Hobbes, the issue of slavery through conquest (in exchange for life) replaced the issue of political liberty, and as a consequence the idea of despotism was reduced to explaining, and sometimes justifying, the exercise of a political power not subject to the limits of civil law.155 Despotism became a kind of power, legitimate in

154 As we have seen, Bodin’s move allowed him to deny that despotism could rest upon constitutional consent or be legitimate, against Aristotle’s emphasis on legality and tradition, and thus made it possible to nullify the thesis that a constitutional, hereditary monarchy such as that of France was despotic unless organized around a concept of political liberty.

155 We may add that where Hobbes differs from Bodin is in his assertion that the
some circumstances (since consent for enslavement was extracted after conquest), rather than a kind of constitution which Asians, but thankfully not Europeans, suffered. From this basis, Richter continues, the concern of Grotius and Pufendorf was to define the circumstances in which this despotic government based on conquest, rather than on the constitutional pact which gives rise to civil societies, could be justified—namely when the war of conquest could be defined as a just one. In this story, the thesis of implicit consent would eventually be contested by Locke, for whom the relationship between master and slave was still one of war, and the conqueror-despot never emerged as a legitimate kind of ruler, because he never really granted security to his subjects.

This anti-Hobbesian move in turn would open the way for Montesquieu’s neo-Aristotelian re-formulation of despotism as a constitutional type of government in which, whilst political liberty was denied, certain civil laws may seem to operate, albeit never in a secure manner—as under despotism, fear rules everything. By contrast, slavery (and here Montesquieu sharply departed from Aristotle as well as from post-Bodinian writers) was rejected as anti-natural and thus incompatible with any civil society.

This is the kind of account that results from an analysis of the “moves” made by a succession of political thinkers, in isolation from the wider intellectual context created by the more empirical genres which sustained early-modern political thought, namely history, cosmography, and travel writing. By restoring the role of writers like Botero and Bernier to the story in the period between Bodin and Locke, we end up relativizing the long-term significance of the themes of conquest and slavery, and instead can retrieve a considerable continuity of emphasis on explaining, through comparison, the unexceptional, traditional character of some circumstances (since consent for enslavement was extracted after conquest), rather than a kind of constitution which Asians, but thankfully not Europeans, suffered. From this basis, Richter continues, the concern of Grotius and Pufendorf was to define the circumstances in which this despotic government based on conquest, rather than on the constitutional pact which gives rise to civil societies, could be justified—namely when the war of conquest could be defined as a just one. In this story, the thesis of implicit consent would eventually be contested by Locke, for whom the relationship between master and slave was still one of war, and the conqueror-despot never emerged as a legitimate kind of ruler, because he never really granted security to his subjects.

This anti-Hobbesian move in turn would open the way for Montesquieu’s neo-Aristotelian re-formulation of despotism as a constitutional type of government in which, whilst political liberty was denied, certain civil laws may seem to operate, albeit never in a secure manner—as under despotism, fear rules everything. By contrast, slavery (and here Montesquieu sharply departed from Aristotle as well as from post-Bodinian writers) was rejected as anti-natural and thus incompatible with any civil society.

This is the kind of account that results from an analysis of the “moves” made by a succession of political thinkers, in isolation from the wider intellectual context created by the more empirical genres which sustained early-modern political thought, namely history, cosmography, and travel writing. By restoring the role of writers like Botero and Bernier to the story in the period between Bodin and Locke, we end up relativizing the long-term significance of the themes of conquest and slavery, and instead can retrieve a considerable continuity of emphasis on explaining, through comparison, the unexceptional, traditional character of some circumstances (since consent for enslavement was extracted after conquest), rather than a kind of constitution which Asians, but thankfully not Europeans, suffered. From this basis, Richter continues, the concern of Grotius and Pufendorf was to define the circumstances in which this despotic government based on conquest, rather than on the constitutional pact which gives rise to civil societies, could be justified—namely when the war of conquest could be defined as a just one. In this story, the thesis of implicit consent would eventually be contested by Locke, for whom the relationship between master and slave was still one of war, and the conqueror-despot never emerged as a legitimate kind of ruler, because he never really granted security to his subjects.

This anti-Hobbesian move in turn would open the way for Montesquieu’s neo-Aristotelian re-formulation of despotism as a constitutional type of government in which, whilst political liberty was denied, certain civil laws may seem to operate, albeit never in a secure manner—as under despotism, fear rules everything. By contrast, slavery (and here Montesquieu sharply departed from Aristotle as well as from post-Bodinian writers) was rejected as anti-natural and thus incompatible with any civil society.

This is the kind of account that results from an analysis of the “moves” made by a succession of political thinkers, in isolation from the wider intellectual context created by the more empirical genres which sustained early-modern political thought, namely history, cosmography, and travel writing. By restoring the role of writers like Botero and Bernier to the story in the period between Bodin and Locke, we end up relativizing the long-term significance of the themes of conquest and slavery, and instead can retrieve a considerable continuity of emphasis on explaining, through comparison, the unexceptional, traditional character of some circumstances (since consent for enslavement was extracted after conquest), rather than a kind of constitution which Asians, but thankfully not Europeans, suffered. From this basis, Richter continues, the concern of Grotius and Pufendorf was to define the circumstances in which this despotic government based on conquest, rather than on the constitutional pact which gives rise to civil societies, could be justified—namely when the war of conquest could be defined as a just one. In this story, the thesis of implicit consent would eventually be contested by Locke, for whom the relationship between master and slave was still one of war, and the conqueror-despot never emerged as a legitimate kind of ruler, because he never really granted security to his subjects.

This anti-Hobbesian move in turn would open the way for Montesquieu’s neo-Aristotelian re-formulation of despotism as a constitutional type of government in which, whilst political liberty was denied, certain civil laws may seem to operate, albeit never in a secure manner—as under despotism, fear rules everything. By contrast, slavery (and here Montesquieu sharply departed from Aristotle as well as from post-Bodinian writers) was rejected as anti-natural and thus incompatible with any civil society.

This is the kind of account that results from an analysis of the “moves” made by a succession of political thinkers, in isolation from the wider intellectual context created by the more empirical genres which sustained early-modern political thought, namely history, cosmography, and travel writing. By restoring the role of writers like Botero and Bernier to the story in the period between Bodin and Locke, we end up relativizing the long-term significance of the themes of conquest and slavery, and instead can retrieve a considerable continuity of emphasis on explaining, through comparison, the unexceptional, traditional character of some circumstances (since consent for enslavement was extracted after conquest), rather than a kind of constitution which Asians, but thankfully not Europeans, suffered. From this basis, Richter continues, the concern of Grotius and Pufendorf was to define the circumstances in which this despotic government based on conquest, rather than on the constitutional pact which gives rise to civil societies, could be justified—namely when the war of conquest could be defined as a just one. In this story, the thesis of implicit consent would eventually be contested by Locke, for whom the relationship between master and slave was still one of war, and the conqueror-despot never emerged as a legitimate kind of ruler, because he never really granted security to his subjects.
of monarchical despotism in Asia, and the uniqueness of Europe. We can also focus attention on the concern of many early-modern writers with understanding the institutional grounds upon which both civil liberty (the individual right to be judged by an independent system of laws) and political liberty (the collective right to exercise some control over the executive and legislative powers) could rest. For many of these writers, what emerged as the strategic issue was assessing the implications of unlimited royal claims to rents and service, a negative situation associated with the lack of private property of land rents and of a hereditary nobility with autonomous legal rights. Of course, given that the concept of despotism in effect targeted the idea of power without limits, the emphasis upon civil or political liberty was bound to shift as the perception of the limits that mattered changed.

In this revised account, the influence of Bodin for the history of the concept is less clear-cut, since not all subsequent writers—not even Botero, who learned so much from him—shared his primary concern with making sovereignty absolute and indivisible within civil societies. In fact, the mainstream tradition in seventeenth-century France accepted Bodin’s absolute monarchy as a remedy to civil strife but emphasized the sovereign’s obligation to uphold natural law and work for the common good, expecting both private property and (increasingly) liberty of thought to be guaranteed. From this perspective the extreme position taken by Hobbes, with the assertion that all legitimate political power is ultimately equivalent to the power of conqueror-descots, is clearly seen as such—extreme, an aberration. In turn, Locke’s analytical move on despotism, whilst important in the context of its immediate debates, is not a necessary, or direct, route to Montesquieu: the latter’s emphasis on the need to subject executive state power to an independent legality rests on a negative image of despotism which derives its power from a combination of metaphorical inspiration and empirical backing. This image of despotism owes a great deal to the anti-absolutist writers of

158 The English republican James Harrington, we might add, belongs in this respect to the tradition of Botero and Bernier. When offering the Ottoman state as example of “absolute” (or “arbitrary”) monarchy, as opposed to aristocratic (or mixed) constitutional monarchies, or to democratic governments, he emphasized the possession of all land by the ruler as the key element of his definition (Harrington, The Commonwealth of Oceana and a System of Politics, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Cambridge, 1992), 11. His anti-Hobbesian argument was that a democratic commonwealth required the distribution of land and property among all citizens, as well as a republican “mixed constitution” dividing the powers of counsel (senate), decision (assembly), and execution (magistrates) among elected bodies.
France in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, who asso-
ciated the concept with the abuses committed by the French monar-
chy, and especially to travelers like Bernier, who, without neces-
arily using the word despotism, provided evidence that unless sovereign power
was structurally limited by laws and institutions, it could not be made
to serve the common good. It is Bernier who emerges as the most fas-
cinating figure: a philosophical traveler, apparently expounding—through
Gassendi—a Bodinian definition of despotism, but in reality re-defining,
through empirical analysis, an over-arching oriental system in which the
resources of the state are concentrated in the hands of a monarch, hence
denying political liberty to the elites, civil liberty to the subjects, and
prosperity to the state as a whole. A system, in other words, which
could be readily built up as a very real temptation for a Bodinian (let
alone Hobbesian) ruler, and thus as a threat to the constitutional balance
in France.

Epilogue: Oriental Despotism as a Cross-Cultural Fantasy

In the face of the criticisms made by Voltaire and Anquetil-Duperron,
and recently taken up by Grossrichard, we must end this discussion by
returning to the question of whether the perception of a fundamental
contrast between Asia and Europe was basically an orientalist con-
struction—admittedly, we now may add, a construction in which the
role of empirical travelers was no less important than that of armchair
cosmographers and political thinkers, but, at the end of the day, still a
projection of European concerns which oriental peoples could not have
easily shared or understood. For many reasons, the issue of how ori-
ental peoples perceived their own regimes remains largely unexplored,
but if we can use the perceptions of a number of eighteenth-century
Indian travelers to Europe as indication, it would seem that the con-
trast between the two kinds of regimes was not lost to them. It is in
fact remarkable the extent to which travelers not yet thoroughly sub-
ject to a British education, but still writing in Persian for an Indian
audience and mainly influenced by the political assumptions of the
Mughal system, ended up very much declaring not only the funda-
mental differences between the regimes of Britain and India, but also
the superiority of the foreign system of government. Thus, the Bengali

159 For the following I have benefited from Gilfishan Khan’s extremely useful Indian
Muslim Perceptions of the West during the Eighteenth Century (Karachi, 1998).
nunshi (scribe) I’tisam al-Din (1730-1800), member of the failed embassy of the Mughal emperor Shah ‘Alam to George III of Britain in 1767-9, in his memoir *Shigarf-nama-i wilayat* (composed in 1784), readily declared:

In matters of government the king of England is not independent like the Great Mughal of India. In all state affairs he can do nothing before first consulting his ministers and nobles, and a few men selected from the middle classes. . . . If the king ever becomes drunk with power and, forgetting his oath, begins to tyrannize his subjects, the prominent citizens with popular support will move to dethrone him and replace him with someone more able and just. Under such conditions the king cannot but behave justly and with consideration towards his subjects. . . . For these reasons, compared to other countries the signs of stability, glory and progress are more conspicuous here. Specialists in jurisprudence opine that the English system of justice is the best in the world. They point out that wherever monarchs can rule arbitrarily, subjects suffer and the state eventually faces collapse. . . . A cunning and treacherous minister can reduce a monarch to ineffectuality and rule as the grey eminence. He can then depose a king and install another as he pleases, or even blind a king and keep him confined. The experiences of the unfortunate Gazzuddin Khan, Ahmed Shah, Badshah Alamgir II and the present Badshah Shah Alam bear out my point. In England on the other hand, where all laws are passed with the consent of the people, there is no room for such developments. . . .

In England everyone is free; no one can lord over another, and there is no such thing as master and slave which is totally different from other countries in which all are slaves of the king.160

I’tisam al-Din seems to have been exposed to some European political thought, either whilst in England or in conversation with the officials of the East India Company—his views are obviously whiggish, and the reference to “specialists in jurisprudence” praising the English system almost invites us to imagine Montesquieu.161 What is however remarkable is the Indian’s willingness to adopt this kind of comparative analysis and make it his own, leading to some self-reflective, often disparaging

160 Kaiser Haq, *The Wonders of Vilayet, Being the Memoir, Originally in Persian, of a Visit to France and Britain in 1765* (Leeds, 2002), 105-7. Although it is unfortunately based on a Bengali intermediary version, for my quotations I have used this complete modern translation in preference of the partial early translation by J.E. Alexander *Shigarf-nama-i Vilayat, or Excellent Intelligence Concerning Europe, Being the Travels of Mirza Itesamodeen* (London, 1827), which I have consulted for comparisons (Alexander’s version of the material quoted here is reduced to the first and last sentences). Khan’s discussion is based on the Persian manuscript held at Oxford (Bodleian Library, ms. 1854).

161 Of course there is no use of the word “despotism” in the Persian original, but the word is not indispensable. In her analysis of these narratives, Khan pays some attention to the way in which the authors found, or created (with remarkable success), Persian equivalents for concepts and names of institutions, like Parliament, which were new to their literary language. She also reveals the extent to which these former Mughal bureaucrats conversed and exchanged ideas with the British officials from whom they now desperately sought patronage. This sometimes led to important examples of literary collaboration with European scholar-officials like William Jones or Jonathan Scott.
passages on the politics of his native country (as well as other aspects of Indian social life). Although it is not clear to which extent I’itsam al-Din confronted the contradiction between his praise for the British system of separation of powers and the powerful ideals of royal justice and exalted authority that pervaded the Indo-Persian tradition of political thought, he emerges as exceptionally reform-minded. This was probably a response to the prosperity and cultivation he saw in Britain, but also to the tragic decline of Mughal power and to the extent and rapidity of the British conquests in India, all of which struck his generation of Indo-Persian scholars. I’itsam al-Din was not reluctant to acknowledge the novel reality of European superiority, which he saw as rooted in cultural causes. He was in effect an anglophile, member of an Indo-Muslim service gentry forced to transfer its allegiance from the native rulers to the East India Company, and willing to serve and admire the new conquerors (despite the fact that he had been cheated of his embassy’s success by the duplicity of Robert Clive). As a pious Muslim educated at the service of the nawab of Bengal, however, he was not thoroughly anglicized: he mostly read Persian historiography, rejected any relaxation of sharia rules in his travels, and in fact failed to learn English during his year in Britain (although he helped William Jones in Oxford with his Persian studies). His was not an isolated case either. Thus, Abu

162 For example: “The new skills and knowledge they acquire are simplified and systematized to that they may be easily taught to novices. This they do not only on the case of navigational science but of the other branches of learning as well. This trait is peculiar to Europeans. Their courage and industry have made them the most powerful people on earth,” in Wonders of Vilayet, 34.

163 When in 1765 the defeated Mughal emperor Shah ‘Alam was compelled to formally cede by the treaty of Allahabad the revenues of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa to the East India Company, he also sought to obtain military help from the British by appealing directly to George III, sending presents with a Company representative, Captain Swinton. Swinton was therefore the emperor’s formal ambassador, and I’itsam al-Din (who had previously served the English) his Persian-speaking representative. The East India Company was not keen on helping the Mughal unconditionally and of course preferred to deal with Indian powers without government interference, hence Robert Clive suppressed the letter and offered the presents as his own. I’itsam al-Din traveled with Captain Swinton and was modestly entertained in Oxford and Edinburgh, but of course the embassy was fictitious and he never met George III. Instead, he was offered the job of teaching Persian in Britain, which he refused.

164 As Michael Fisher notes, all the authors of travel narratives of a journey to Britain written by Indians for Indian audiences in this period (he considers four) belonged to, and wrote for, the same class of Muslim scholar-officials. They all were educated in a Persian literary tradition, and invariably belonged to families that had served the regional successor states of the Mughals. All, in turn, traveled to Europe under British protection. See M. Fisher, “From India to England and Back: Early Indian Travel Narratives for Indian Readers” (unpublished paper, 2004). Fisher’s two other examples are Munshi
Talib ibn Muhammad Isfahani, poet and scholar in Persian, who transferred his services as revenue officer from the rulers of Oudh to the English Company but failed to keep employment, similarly wrote an account of his journey to Britain in 1799-1803. In it, like I’tisam al-Din, he contrasted the learning and prosperity of Europe to the complacency and poverty of India. He did not, like his predecessor, account for the decline of the Mughal empire by analyzing the various effects of political despotism, but he spoke highly of the way an independent judiciary limited royal power in Britain, of the legislative power of parliament, of the stability brought by this balance of powers, and of the benefits of the rule of law (*qanun*).165

If the idea of oriental despotism was only a fantasy, it seems that this fantasy, or at least some of its fundamental elements, could be shared by non-Europeans with very little prompting.166

---

Ismahil (whose views on the politics of Britain are quite similar to I’tisam al-Din’s) and Mir Muhammad ibn Abdul Azim Isfahani (who proposed adopting European science as the key to a new world-view).


166 Early versions of this article were presented at the seminar on the History of Political Thought at the Institute for Historical Research (London), and at an *Itinerario* workshop on early modern images of Asia organized by the Centre for the History of the European Expansion (Leiden). The author is grateful for the invitations that prompted this article. This version has also benefited from comments by Ernst van den Boogaart, Daniel Carey, Joya Chatterji, Nicholas Dew, Michael Fisher, John Headley, Tim Hochstrasser, Istvan Hont, Peter Miller, and an anonymous reader for *JEMH*.