

Look at Politics With Eyes Unclouded By Philosophy: The Arendtian Reading of Montesquieu

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In the following, I will trace the presence of Montesquieu in Arendt's work, giving an account of both Arendt's praise for the French writer's particular way of thinking the political and his approach to problems that will become central to the development of Arendt's own thought. Firstly, I will follow Arendt down the path that led her to discover fundamental tools in Montesquieu for understanding totalitarianism «with eyes unclouded by philosophy». Secondly, I will track the way in which the Arendtian reconceptualization of some key political words—power, law and freedom—is threaded through with her reading of the French author. Thirdly, I will look into the way in which Montesquieu's formulation of a particular link between what Arendt calls the basic experience and the political regime, allows her to go on to discover a criteria that makes it possible to distinguish between political and anti-political ways of living together; and allows us to see that there is a phenomenally essential element within tyranny and totalitarianism that ensures that it «develops the germs of its own destruction the moment it comes into existence».

Keywords: *Arendt, Montesquieu, freedom, political regime, principles*

This paper begins with a well-known scene: Günter Gaus and Hannah Arendt are having a public conversation (the interview was broadcast on German television in 1964) about Arendt's life and work. Gaus starts the conversation by declaring that Arendt is the first woman in the male dominated profession of philosophy to participate in this round of interviews, and he asks her if she considers her role within the “circle of philosophers” to be unusual. More concerned about her inclusion in this circle than Gaus's enquiry, Arendt reacts, bringing up some objections and protesting that first, although she did study philosophy, she bid farewell to it a long time ago. Second, she states that her profession is not in fact philosophy, but rather political theory. Finally, she asserts that:

The expression ‘political philosophy’, which I avoid, is extremely burdened by tradition. When I talk about these things [. . .], I always mention that there is a vital tension between philosophy and politics. That is, between man as a thinking being and man as an acting being, there is a tension that does not exist in natural philosophy, for example. Like everyone else, the philosopher can be objective with regard to nature, and when he says what he thinks about it he speaks in the name of all mankind. But he cannot be objective or neutral with regard to politics. Not since Plato! [. . .] There is a kind of enmity against all politics in most philosophers, with very few exceptions [. . .] «I want no part in this enmity», that's it exactly! I want to look at politics, so to speak, with eyes unclouded by philosophy².

¹ Si ringrazia l'Autore e gli «Arendt Studies» per averci concesso l'autorizzazione a pubblicare il presente contributo apparso originariamente nel volume 2 (2018), pp. 171-191, della succitata rivista.

² Hannah Arendt, «What Remains?», 2.

The experience of totalitarianism; the emergence into the political scene of a new type of domination that «exploded our categories of political thought and our standards of moral judgment»³, led Arendt to reconsider the tradition of political philosophy. Through her inquiry, she discovered a difference in the way authors of the past thought about politics, which drove her to opposing philosophers and «political writers». It is important to distinguish, she cautions, between those who try to impose external standards on the city (the philosophers), and those who write based on contact with events, attempting to understand what happens for «the sake of politics» and nothing more⁴. Machiavelli, Montesquieu and Tocqueville are among these «political writers», fixated on thinking about the public realm without asking themselves what the end of politics is, and without thinking that politics pursues a goal higher than itself⁵.

Over the following pages, I will look into the Arendtian interpretation of Montesquieu, taking this distinction into consideration. I will trace the presence of the French writer in Arendt's work⁶, giving an account of both Arendt's praise for the French writer's particular way of thinking the political and his approach to problems that will become central to the development of Arendt's own thought. Firstly, I will follow Arendt down the path that led her to discover fundamental tools in Montesquieu for understanding totalitarianism «with eyes unclouded by philosophy». Secondly, I will track the way in which the Arendtian reconceptualization of some key political words – power, law and freedom – is threaded through with her reading of the French author. Thirdly, I will look into the way in which Montesquieu's formulation of a particular link between what Arendt calls the basic experience and the political regime, allows her to go on to discover in the interconnectedness of the appearances⁷, a criteria that makes it possible to distinguish between political and anti-political ways of living together; and allows us to see that there is a phenomenally essential element within tyranny and totalitarianism that ensures that it «develops the germs of its own destruction the moment it comes into existence»⁸.

1. *The Break With Tradition and Montesquieu's Place In Understanding Totalitarianism*

Following the publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951, Arendt attempted to identify the criteria, based on phenomenal differences, that would enable totalitarianism to be distinguished from other forms of government⁹. Her research had led her to discover the historic elements that had

³ Hannah Arendt, «Understanding and Politics», 310; see also Hannah Arendt, «A Reply to Eric Voegelin», in *Essay in Understanding*, 405; Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Thinking, 6-13; and Hannah Arendt, «On Humanity in Dark Times», 10.

⁴ See Hannah Arendt, «From Machiavelli to Marx», 023453. There are direct or indirect references to this question at various times in Arendt's work. See for example, Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 21; Hannah Arendt, *Diario filosófico*, 225; and Hannah Arendt, «The Great Tradition: I. Law and Power», *Social Research* 74.3 (2007): 721.

⁵ As Simona Forti has pointed out, the freedom to look at the past after the breaking with tradition allowed Arendt to «rediscover the anti-philosophical scope of 'political writers' such as Machiavelli, Montesquieu, and Tocqueville, who focused on praxis without attempting to 'extract' the laws from the metaphysical realm». Simona Forti, *Vida del espíritu y tiempo de la polis*, 111. See also Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*, 69 and 202; Miguel Abensour, *Hannah Arendt contre la philosophie politique?*, 33; and Anne Amiel, «Hannah Arendt lectrice de Montesquieu», 120.

⁶ The first mention of Montesquieu appears in the 1951 edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*; but his presence there still lacks relevance. However, at the end of that same year, in the *Denktagebuch*, Arendt notes all the references from *The Spirit of the Laws* that would go on to be key in her interpretation of the French writer and which would assist her in her attempt to understand the two central experiences of modernity: revolutions and totalitarianism. See Arendt, *Diario filosófico*, 145.

⁷ I am borrowing this formula from Claude Lefort, who uses it in his analysis of Machiavelli. See Claude Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, 181.

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 203.

⁹ It should be clarified that the traditional words (for example, government or essence) are often inadequate to express what Arendt means. Thus, in Arendt's reply to Voegelin, she states that in order to know the essence of totalitarianism it

crystallized in this new kind of domination, but was not able to shed light on its particular distinctive features – to explain its *nature*¹⁰. At the same time, the categories used by the tradition of political philosophy to think about and define different forms of government were inadequate when trying to understand an experience which had utterly shattered the links with the past. The confrontation with totalitarianism drove Arendt to examine the tradition of political philosophy and, in Montesquieu, to discover a fundamental ally in explaining this phenomenon. To understand it, in 1953 she declared: «we enlisted the help of Montesquieu in order to know what question to ask»¹¹.

Since Plato, Arendt asserts, all definitions concerning the nature of the different forms of government have rested on two pillars: power and law. The difference between them depends on the distribution of power – possessed by one, many or all – and on the relation with the law; a just government being one that acts according to the law and an unjust government, one that rules contrary to what the law dictates¹². Even though this classification seems to establish sufficient criteria to distinguish between regimes throughout history, Arendt points out that the emergence of a form of domination that cannot be subsumed under these two “pillars” (neither the number of those who govern nor the distinction between legality and arbitrariness are enough to determine its meaning) forces us to interrogate the classic definition and ask ourselves if the elements it comprises are valid.

Unlike Plato, Montesquieu understood that «The concrete actions of each government and of the citizens living under the various forms of government cannot be explained in accordance with the two conceptual pillars of traditional definitions of power as the distinction between ruling and being ruled, and of law as the limitation of such power»¹³. In other words, he had understood – even before the political experience which subsequently shattered the classical definition into a thousand pieces¹⁴ – that law and power as conceived by the tradition were not up to the task of explaining what distinguishes one regime from another.

If we follow the trail of Montesquieu in Arendt’s writing after the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, it could be deduced that there are three stages in her interpretation of the classical definition furthered by the French writer: firstly, Montesquieu changed the criteria used to determine the *nature* of each type of government. Secondly, he incorporated the principles of action as the element that effectively allows regimes to be distinguished from each other. Thirdly, he discovered the “ground” which these principles spring from.

In respect to their *nature*, says Arendt, Montesquieu identifies three types of regime; three, which in reality are four: republic (democratic and aristocratic), monarchy, and despotism. These

is imperative to pay attention to the phenomenal differences which in effect bestow its specificity. See Arendt, «A Reply to Eric Voegelin», 405.

¹⁰ See Amiel, «Hannah Arendt lectrice de Montesquieu», 123.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, «The Great Tradition and the Nature of Totalitarianism», 6. The French writer’s presence in the notes and manuscripts from these years, as well as published articles, is highly visible. In 1953, in a letter to Henry Allen Moe at the Guggenheim Foundation, Arendt wrote that she had found in Montesquieu the instruments to distinguish totalitarianism from all other, even the most tyrannical, forms of government from the past (Letter from Arendt to Moe, 29 January 1953, Guggenheim Correspondence, 012642. Cited in Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*, 86). That same year she published «Ideology and Terror» (which she would later include as the final chapter in the 1958 edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*), where Montesquieu, as we will see, is key in establishing the elements that define this new form of domination. At the same time, in a letter to Martin Heidegger in 1954, she notes that she has been working on Montesquieu’s ideas for three years, in particular on his analysis of «forms of government», to elucidate when the category of rule was introduced into political thought. See Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger, *Correspondencia 1925-1975*, 137. As regards the presence of Montesquieu during these years, see also Arendt, «The Great Tradition and the Nature of Totalitarianism»; Arendt, «History of Political Theory»; Arendt, «On the Nature of Totalitarianism», 328-338; Arendt, «A Reply to Eric Voegelin», 408–410; Arendt, «The Great Tradition: I», 713–726; Arendt, «The Great Tradition: II. Rule and Being Ruled»; Arendt, «Montesquieu’s Revision of the Tradition»; Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 460–479.

¹² See Arendt, «The Great Tradition: I», 713.

¹³ Arendt, «Montesquieu’s Revision of the Tradition», 63–64.

¹⁴ Totalitarianism, says Arendt, «has exploded the very alternative on which all definitions of the essence of governments have been based in political philosophy, that is the alternative between lawful and lawless government, between arbitrary and legitimate power». Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 461.

regimes are no different from each other in the number of people who govern (as in the classical model). Instead, the difference between them is related to those with access to the public space and who will be able, therefore, to act. Despite the fact that the numerical factor seems to bear some relevance in this definition, just as in the Platonic conception¹⁵, Arendt states that here the emphasis is placed on the actions of those in power, and not on the relationship they have with those who are governed¹⁶. At the same time, she adds, Montesquieu introduces a second distinction – whose dividing line separates the monarchy and the republic from despotism – between moderate governments (who rule subject to the law) and non-moderate governments.

Although it could be said that the two traditional elements used to determine the nature of each regime appear to endure in this typology, Arendt understands that neither the number of those in power, nor the link with the law offer sufficient criteria to identify each of them. In point of fact, she writes, to the extent that Montesquieu «took the lawfulness of governments as his starting point, saw that there must be more to governments than law and power to explain the actual and constant actions of the citizens living within walls of law, as well as the performances of bodies politic themselves, whose ‘spirit’ so obviously differs from one to another»¹⁷.

In this way, she declares that his great innovation was to conceive that each of these «structures of government» needs a principle to set it in motion; or that, for them to correspond with the ways in which human beings live together, it is necessary not only to describe their *nature*, («*ce qui le fait être tel*»), but also to analyze their principle of action, to investigate what it is that makes them act¹⁸. Montesquieu, Arendt reminds us, identifies virtue, honor and fear as the principles of action of the republic, the monarchy and despotism respectively.

The references in Arendt’s work regarding how these principles should be understood are varied: «one might say», she writes, «that it is the fundamental conviction that a group of people share»¹⁹; they «are much rather the guiding criteria by which all actions in the public realm are judged beyond the merely negative yardstick of lawfulness, and which inspire the actions of both rulers and ruled»²⁰; or «the very criteria according to which all public life is led and judged»²¹. Originally discovered by Montesquieu, the principles are then taken up by Arendt in her attempt to think about action disassociated from the logic of means and ends, or in other words, separated from concern for motives and consequences²². Continuing in the same vein as the French writer, she affirms that principles inspire the actions of individuals living in a community, and that at the same time, they

¹⁵ It is striking, writes Arendt, that Montesquieu, who introduced the idea that power is divisible, should have retained the issue of number (as if power were concentrated in one, several or all) to define the types of regime according to their nature. See Arendt, «On the Nature of Totalitarianism», 330.

¹⁶ The key concept that determines the classical definition of forms of government, and with it, of politics, is rule. See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 222. In contrast to this, Montesquieu’s differentiation between regimes does «not know the distinction between the ruler and the ruled», since Montesquieu is interested in the public sphere, where we live in common in the mode of acting together. Arendt, «History of Political Theory», 024188-024189. See also Arendt, *Diario filosófico*, 318-319 and 340-341.

¹⁷ Arendt, «Montesquieu’s Revision of the Tradition», 64-65.

¹⁸ See Arendt, «The Great Tradition: I», 723. In Arendt’s copy of *The Spirit of the Laws*, which is deposited in the *Arendt Collection* of Bard College, Arendt made a note in the upper section at the start of book III («Of the Principles of the Three Kinds of Government»): «Principles stronger even than laws». See *The Arendt Collection, Bard College*. <http://www.bard.edu/library/arendt/pdfs/Montesquieu-Spirit.pdf>.

¹⁹ Hannah Arendt, «Introduction into Politics», 194-195. Arendt draws attention to the fact that Montesquieu reduced the principles to three, but that within them are to be found glory, freedom, justice and equality. Along the same lines, she maintains that this reduction «is of course pitifully inadequate to the rich diversity of human beings living together on the earth». Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Willing, 202. See also Claudia Hilb, «El principio del initium», 73-74.

²⁰ Arendt, «Montesquieu’s Revision of the Tradition», 65.

²¹ Arendt, «On the Nature of Totalitarianism. An Essay in Understanding», 332. See also Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Willing, 202.

²² It would seem that Montesquieu’s discovery of the principles offered Arendt some elements to think about politics beyond tradition and its attempt to substitute action for fabrication. Against tradition, Arendt understands that whereas motives are often understood as intentional and individual, the inspiration that comes from principles is relational and public. See Hannah Arendt, «What is Freedom», 150-151.

offer criteria to differentiate between regimes, since each organizes the public realm in a particular way.

Most of the secondary literature that redress the Arendt-Montesquieu link stop here²³. In their view, Montesquieu has supplied Arendt with the elements to think about action as separate from the idea of government (focusing on the possibilities or difficulties citizens face to be able to act), and, at the same time, the criteria to distinguish between regimes. However, Arendtian analysis is not exhausted by this point; in all the references she made about principles during the 1950s, Arendt not only specifies their general characteristics, but also traces the way that Montesquieu identified the «common ground» they emerge from, linking each principle to «one of the few basic experiences which men can have whenever they live together, and are concerned with public affairs»²⁴.

In this way, Arendt says, Montesquieu affirms that virtue arises out of «love» of equality, and honor out of «love» of distinction²⁵. The republic is based on the experience

of living together with and belonging to a group of equally powerful men [. . .]. The common ground of republican law and action is thus the insight that human power is not primarily limited by some superior power, God or Nature, but by the powers of one's equals²⁶.

It is only due to the existence of equality, understood as equivalent *strength* of each person to everyone else, that we are aware that we are not alone. Virtue as a principle of action springs from the joy we experience when we discover that we share the world with our equals. The organization of the public realm in the republic is anchored in this experience of equality, which allows it to replicate its existence in a lasting form.

The experience of difference emerges in contrast with the experience of equality. The basic experience on which monarchy is founded is that all human beings differ from each other by birth²⁷. The “love” for distinction (crystallized in the principle of honor) arises from this particular human

²³ See for example Peg Birmingham, *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights*, 12; Lucy Cane, «Hannah Arendt on the Principles of Political Action» and «Arendt on Principles, the Right to Have Rights, and Democracy»; Sofia Näsström, «The Right to Have Rights»; James Muldoon, «Arendtian Principles». This way of interpreting the link between the two authors is supported by the fact that Arendt herself suggests that the subject of the principles is one of the most astonishing discoveries made by Montesquieu (the other refers to the nature of power and its division). In this respect, see Arendt, *Diario filosófico*, 175-176 and Arendt, «History of Political Theory», 024188. What is generally overlooked by those who focus on the principles – with the exception of Claudia Hilb and Anne Amiel – is the relationship between principle and basic experience, which as we will see is central to my argument.

²⁴ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 461. In the same period, she wrote: «Beneath Montesquieu's unsystematic and sometimes even casual observations about the relationship between the nature of governments and their principles of action lies an even deeper insight into the essentials of unity in historically given civilizations. His “esprit général” is what unites the structure of government with its corresponding principle of action . . . His general unifying spirit is first of all a *basic experience of men living and acting together*, which expresses itself simultaneously in the laws of a country and in the actions of men living under this law». Arendt, «The Great Tradition: I», 725 (the italics are mine).

²⁵ Two clarifications should be made: firstly, as observed by Claudia Hilb, «where Montesquieu brings the principle of action into relation with love (love of equality, of frugality, of distinction, etc.) or with a passion or feeling (such as with fear), Arendt will say that instead of love, she personally prefers to relate the principle with what she calls ‘experience,’ ‘basic experience,’ ‘fundamental experience,’ or ‘authentic experience of the human condition’». Hilb, «El principio del initium», 74. See also Arendt, «History of Political Theory», 024191. Secondly, Arendt realizes that this discovery is the key to being able to explain why there has been almost no change in types of regime for 2500 years; if every form of coexistence is governed by a principle that springs from one of the fundamental experiences of human beings living together, then the variety of regimes will depend on the number of possible experiences.

²⁶ Arendt, «On the Nature of Totalitarianism», 336. In «On the Nature of Totalitarianism» Arendt uses the word power to refer to what appears in other texts as strength. As we will see, in the same period she points out that for Montesquieu, power emerges among people when they act together, it is not something possessed by an individual.

²⁷ In contrast to Montesquieu, Arendt considers that distinction is the basic experience, not just in monarchies but in all forms of hierarchical government. See Arendt, «Montesquieu's Revision of the Tradition», 66. For her, aristocracy is not therefore a variant of the republic. Instead, it is associated – through the experience that defines it – to monarchy. Basic experience therefore shows itself to be a much more important factor than the number of those in power in order to evaluate which kind of regime we are confronted with.

condition: in the presence of others, everyone discovers their own singularity and may, therefore, wish to acquire pre-eminence. As a result of confronting others through words and deeds in the public space, individuals gain their own identity. «Honor is public recognition of this particular being who I am»²⁸.

The common ground which the principle of action in the republic springs from, and which laws are structured around, is equality. The experience on which monarchy rests and in which the roots of its principle of action are found, is distinction. Virtue and honor, affirms Arendt, arise «from ‘loving’ *one or the other of the two fundamental and interconnected traits of the human condition of plurality*»²⁹. Equality and distinction, therefore, are not only fundamental experiences which these principles arise from, they also express the two distinctive features of the human condition. As Arendt seems to suggest here, analysis of the link between basic experience and principle of action leads us to consider that the way in which each regime relates with plurality is fundamental to understand its dynamic.

Montesquieu, Arendt says, did not answer the question of which experience corresponds with fear as a principle of action³⁰. However, she realizes this gap can be bridged by continuing down the path he has forged. Just like virtue and honor, fear is also linked, albeit negatively, with the *factum* of plurality. This connection occurs through the anguish we experience in situations when the common experience is hindered³¹. Fear emerges from the discovery that our individual strength (which only becomes power when we act in concert with others) may be easily surpassed by the strength of the rest and thus transformed into impotence. The fundamental experience it rests on is isolation³². As a principle of action, Arendt affirms, it is a contradiction in terms. It appears when we cannot act; generating impotence as naturally as the other principles generate power. Fear «as distinct from the principles of virtue and honor, has no self-transcending power [does not inspire individuals to act, but paralyzes them instead] and is therefore truly anti-political. Fear as a principle of action can only be destructive or, in the words of Montesquieu, ‘self-corrupting’. *Tyranny is therefore the only form of government which bears germs of its destruction within itself*»³³. I will explore this problem at the end of the paper. Now, I would like to return to the topic posed at the beginning of this section.

As I mentioned above, in 1953 Arendt maintained that if we want to understand totalitarianism then it is necessary to revert to Montesquieu to know what question to ask. It is now possible to understand more clearly what she was referring to. Each form of human coexistence is based on a fundamental experience, which crystallizes into a principle of action that sets the city in motion. Therefore,

the entirely new and unprecedented forms of totalitarian organization and course of action must [also] rest on one of the few basic experiences which men can have whenever they live together, and are concerned with public affairs. If there is a basic experience which finds its political expression in totalitarian domination, then, in view of the novelty of the totalitarian form of government, this must be an experience which, for whatever reason, has never before served as the

²⁸ Arendt, «The Great Tradition and the Nature of Totalitarianism», 4.

²⁹ Arendt, «Montesquieu’s Revision of the Tradition», 66. The italics are mine.

³⁰ See Arendt, «History of Political Theory», 024191; Arendt, «On the Nature of Totalitarianism», 336; Arendt, «The Great Tradition: I», 726; and Arendt, «Montesquieu’s Revision of the Tradition», 66 and 68.

³¹ «In situations where action is impossible, plurality changes: It is no longer joy of not being alone, or hope of distinguishing oneself, being distinct but: Plurality becomes Majority against One. This politically is mistrust and fear. Tyranny: The fear which is instilled by the mere presence of all others in my helpless impotence: From there comes: Will to dominate and resignation to be dominated». Arendt, «History of Political Theory», 024192.

³² There are some variations with respect to the words Arendt uses to express what the basic experience on which tyranny rests would be. In «On the Nature of Totalitarianism», she employs the term loneliness, but when explaining it, she ascribes it all the characteristics that she uses to describe isolation in «Ideology and Terror».

³³ Arendt, «On the Nature of Totalitarianism», 337. The italics are mine. See also Arendt, «History of Political Theory», 024193; Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 203; and Arendt, «Montesquieu’s Revision of the Tradition», 64.

foundation of a body politic and whose general mood – although it may be familiar in every other respect – never before has pervaded, and directed the handling of, public affairs³⁴.

Throughout «Ideology and Terror», Arendt tries to understand totalitarianism starting with its *nature* and principle of action. The totalitarian government, she says, cannot be subsumed under the classic definition of tyranny: its relation to law (which no longer functions as a limiting factor) and with power (the number of those governing is irrelevant to determine its meaning) is excluded. Terror seems to offer the key when considering the *nature* of the totalitarian government and ideology seems to work as the principle of action of the regime. But neither operate as they should; the distinction between legality and arbitrariness does not offer elements to understand the law of terror, transformed into movement; and rather than inspire action, ideology restricts behavior.

The development of the text leads us here – just like the Arendtian inquiry into Montesquieu – from the question of the *nature* and the principles of action, to the problem of basic experience on which totalitarianism is grounded. Just like tyranny, totalitarianism uses fear as a means to isolate individuals and destroy the space between them. Although the fundamental experience it rests on is not isolation, but loneliness. Loneliness, wrote Arendt, not only separates from others in the public realm, but also destroys the private sphere, where we develop «the most elementary form of human creativity, which is the capacity to add something of one’s own to the common world»³⁵. Based on this, totalitarian domination breaks the relationship we have with ourselves – the two-in-one of thinking – rupturing our common sense and our link with reality³⁶.

The ultimate difference between totalitarianism compared to every regime of the past, even the most tyrannical, seems to therefore be answered based on the discovery – which Arendt makes when she comes into contact with Montesquieu – that each type of human coexistence rests on «one of the few basic experiences which men can have whenever they live together». Arendt goes on to establish the particular characteristics of this new form of domination by identifying the experience that made its emergence possible.

2. Montesquieu and Arendtian Vocabulary: Words (and Their Meaning) Matter

Following Montesquieu’s trail through texts drawn up in the 1950s, we discover that inquiry into the link between principle and experience helps Arendt to question – in defiance of tradition – the criteria that enable us to distinguish between regimes, and to think about the specificity of totalitarianism. As we will now see, the French writer also contributed to Arendt’s reconceptualization of fundamental political words: power, law and freedom, as part of her attempt to find a suitable (non-philosophical) vocabulary to understand the sphere of human affairs³⁷.

2.a. Power

With respect to the Arendtian reconceptualization of power, several clues point to the fact that during the years following the publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, contact with Montesquieu’s

³⁴ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 461.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 475. This ability can be exhibited even under tyranny, which, as it preserves the private sphere intact, allows human activities to be carried out both as *homo faber* and as thinking beings.

³⁶ In «Ideology and Terror», Arendt distinguishes three types of experiences that suppose a lack of relation to others: loneliness, isolation and solitude. The defining characteristic of loneliness is that it not only breaks the link with others, but also erodes the relationship with oneself. On the differences between these experiences, see Arendt *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 474-479; Arendt, «The Great Tradition and the Nature of Totalitarianism», 10; Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Thinking, 74 and 185; Arendt, «On the Nature of Totalitarianism», 335-338.

³⁷ Her use of Montesquieu does not end there; Arendt also employs his work to outline ways of thinking about human nature and customs (away from any naturalistic conception) disassociated from tradition. In this respect see Arendt, «A Reply to Eric Voeglin», 408; Arendt, «Understanding and Politics», 315-317; and Arendt, «The Tradition of Political Thought», 40-41.

work leads Arendt to formulate the idea – fundamental for her mature thought – that power is not something possessed by one private individual; neither is it something that enables rule over others, nor even the total combined strength of everyone; instead it is what emerges between people when they act together.

Both in the texts she wrote for her classes, in the *Denktagebuch*, and in the draft of the manuscript for her book on Marx which she never finished, there are several references where she indicates that Montesquieu was perhaps the only one who conceived power as detached from the idea of rule – as opposed to sovereignty – and who linked it to the plurality inherent in action. In an entry of the *Denktagebuch* from 1952, talking about the doctrine of Montesquieu's separation of powers, she states:

the essential thing is recognizing that power is not simply controllable, something the Romans were well aware of, but that it is also divisible, without it necessarily decreasing, or it losing its quality. This means that sovereignty is not a primary determination of power. Power is not a phenomenon of will; neither is it engendered by will, nor primarily the object of will³⁸.

At the same time, in 1955, she notes that for Montesquieu, power appears through acting in concert. In other words, individual strength only transforms into power when many act together; or that it disappears as soon as men are separated from each other and isolated from the rest³⁹.

These references, amongst others, are complemented by those that arise during analysis of the revolutions. The idea that power is fragile, that it can be quickly diminished – through violence – to impotence, runs through the whole of chapter IV of *On Revolution*, where Montesquieu's presence is fundamental to illustrate the counterpoint between the American experience and the French⁴⁰. Here, Arendt states that the French writer's great discovery regarding power not only refers to the question of its division, but also of its very nature. This is contained in the statement that only «power arrests power», to which Arendt adds: «without destroying it, without putting impotence in the place of power»⁴¹. This makes it possible to say that following contact with Montesquieu's work, Arendt arrives at the idea that the only way to deal with the fragility of power is by establishing – as in the American Revolution – a regime through which human beings' natural tendency to «abuse power» is counteracted by the existence of checks and balances⁴². This is the only way in which the public space, created through action in concert, can preserve its properties. During her study of the revolutions, Arendt recognizes the debt owed by the American actors to Montesquieu, and in addition uses him to illustrate that the establishment of a strictly political space requires power to be conceived as disassociated from the idea of command over others. Instead, power is rooted in the plurality of the action of the many.

2.b. Law

Montesquieu also plays an essential role in Arendt's reconceptualization of law. The tradition has bequeathed us a concept of law which understands it as command; Arendt, for her part, tries to think about it as something which organizes political communities, in the same way «as the rules directed

³⁸ Arendt, *Diario filosófico*, 175–176. See also Arendt, «The Great Tradition: I», 722.

³⁹ See Arendt, «History of Political Theory», 024188, 024192, and 024189. See also Arendt, «From Machiavelli to Marx», 023481 and Arendt, «Montesquieu's Revision of the Tradition», 69.

⁴⁰ When comparing the understanding of power between the two sides of the Atlantic, Arendt says that whilst the French understood it as a force of nature, pre-political and identified (thanks to Rousseauian vocabulary) with the (General) will of the nation; the Americans, inspired by their own experience and Montesquieu's work, believed that power emerged from acting in concert.

⁴¹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, 151.

⁴² In Montesquieu's sentence – «every man invested with power is apt to abuse it, and to carry his authority as far as it will go» – it could be seen that, contrary to Arendt's interpretation of the French author, power is something possessed by individuals. However, when developing his argument, Montesquieu offers sufficient evidence to maintain, along with Arendt, that the issue of power is not related to its possession, but rather to the organization of the political space.

the game»⁴³. This leads her to perceive law as an element that allows different things to relate to each other (as *rapport*); in this way demarcating the space within which individuals can act.

This last idea, says Arendt, was common currency in Roman times. Influenced by his interest in this era, Montesquieu conceived the law as separate from the idea of command. However, he did not notice the innovation that he himself introduced to the old formula. Just as the Romans had done, Montesquieu understood the law as relation, but he used this idea in an unprecedented way: «The underlying notion is: the space between men is a desert, very dangerous, so long as connections, relations, etc. are not established. Wherever you have such relations, a world, properly speaking, is established. Wherever these laws are razed, as in despotism, a desert reappears»⁴⁴.

Through this concept, Arendt understands that Montesquieu is recovering the idea that the law – by establishing connections – transforms a plurality of unrelated things into an organized body politic⁴⁵. But together with this notion, the French writer introduces the metaphor – which for her is essential – that the inexistence of law leads to the appearance of the «desert». This imagery allows us to better understand what for Montesquieu (as interpreted by Arendt) effectively separates moderate governments from despotism⁴⁶. The difference, which is shown to be much more radical than the classical distinction between legal or arbitrary governments, has nothing to do with how those who govern behave (whether or not they «obey» the law), but rather with the way in which the public space is established, or destroyed (as in the case of the desertification that occurs in the absence of law)⁴⁷.

The contrast between the oasis (the image Arendt uses to highlight the moments in which the political appears) and the desert (the metaphor she uses to describe tyranny and to indicate that totalitarianism, unlike it, has unleashed a sand storm setting the «desert itself in motion»)⁴⁸ arises from the Arendtian interpretation of Montesquieu's conception of law. In contact with his work, Arendt introduces the idea that laws establish the *in between* in which human beings may act⁴⁹; they halt the desertification of the world, transforming it into a space where people can relate to each other thanks to the fact that they have something in common⁵⁰.

2.c. Freedom

Through her reading of Montesquieu, Arendt reinterprets fundamental political concepts of the tradition. Law is not command, it is what allows relations to be established between things. Power is not domination, instead it is what (rooted in plurality) emerges between human beings when they act *in the midst* of that space, which is not a desert thanks to the links established by the laws. Picking up on Montesquieu, Arendt says that «It is within this domain of *rapports*, or lawfulness, that power is being exerted; non-separation of power is not the negation of lawfulness, it is the negation of freedom»⁵¹.

This reference offers clues that allow the place that Montesquieu occupies in the Arendtian reconceptualization of freedom to be identified. We can distinguish two aspects of the concept as considered by Arendt: firstly, she understands that freedom is associated with spontaneity, with the

⁴³ See Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, 97.

⁴⁴ Arendt, «From Machiavelli to Marx», 023482.

⁴⁵ See Arendt, «History of Political Theory», 024188.

⁴⁶ See above, p. 6.

⁴⁷ See Arendt, *On Revolution*, 302n19.

⁴⁸ See Arendt, «History of Political Theory», 024193; Arendt, «Introduction into Politics», 189-191; Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 466 and 478.

⁴⁹ See Arendt, *Diario filosófico*, 145.

⁵⁰ In *On Revolution*, Arendt observes that, thanks to the fact that he conceived law in this way, Montesquieu was unique among the pre-revolutionary thinkers in doing away with the need for a transcendent source to legitimize it. See Arendt, *On Revolution*, 188. But in contrast to what happened with power (see above n. 41), Montesquieu's intuition on this subject was not enough for the revolutionaries to escape from the tradition and the need for the absolute which their concept of law required.

⁵¹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 302n19.

ability to make something appear in the world which previously did not exist. Each time she reflects on freedom as a beginning, she does so drawing on Augustine. Secondly, she considers that freedom does not originate from within an individual, but that its existence depends on the way the common space is established: anyone who has access to this space and can move amongst their equals with no arbitrary restrictions is free. Every time Arendt tries to define freedom as non-domination, she does so following Montesquieu.

Regarding freedom, therefore, Montesquieu again appears to have broken the bounds of tradition. Arendt says that while tradition associates freedom to human will – which necessarily means conceiving that only he that manages dominate others is free – Montesquieu – informed by political experience through the ages and his analysis of the English Constitution – linked it to power⁵². Here, power can no longer be translated as what emerges among those participating in the public space, instead it is understood simply as the ability to move freely within that space.

The discovery of the overlap between freedom and power led Montesquieu, observes Arendt, to distinguish between the way in which the tradition conceptualizes freedom and the way in which this effectively exists in the political experience⁵³. Associated to human will, «philosophical freedom» is defined by the French writer as an individual attribute which can be experienced outside of the political communities. In contrast, linked to the capacity to act in the public sphere, Montesquieu says that «political freedom» can only appear when the many who live together establish a regime in which rule over others is prevented through the division of powers.

Both conceptually in «What is Freedom?» and *The Life of the Mind*, and phenomenally – to give it a name – in *On Revolution*, Arendt tries to show the negative consequences for political thought and action that come from associating freedom with will. In theoretical terms, this association «was one of the causes why even today we almost automatically equate power with oppression or, at least, with rule over others»⁵⁴. Equating freedom and the human capacity to will is what led the tradition to consider that to be free is to be sovereign. Against this, and drawing on Montesquieu, Arendt observes that, in the realm of human affairs, sovereignty and tyranny coincide. In political-historical terms, this equation drove the French revolutionaries to think, in line with Rousseau, that the General Will, the expression of a sovereign people, is at the same time the source of power and the origin of law. In contrast, the association of freedom with power, taken from Montesquieu, allows Arendt to interpret that the success of the American Revolution lies in the fact that only there was it possible to instill a regime that, thanks to checks and balances, established the conditions for political freedom to emerge in addition to guaranteeing individual rights⁵⁵.

However, despite the fact that she returns to Montesquieu every time she tries to think about freedom against the tradition, Arendt also says that during the classical antiquity, those who were involved in the political sphere were aware of the experience of freedom as the ability to move in the public realm with no arbitrary restrictions. Likewise, she points out that the theory of the division of powers, or the balance of power as she prefers to call it, which ensures the existence of a common space free from domination, can be traced, at least implicitly, back to Aristotle and Polybius, who argued about the advantages of a mixed regime⁵⁶. For this reason, arguing that Montesquieu holds a privileged place in Arendt's comprehension of freedom does not mean that she thinks the French

⁵² *Ibid.*, 150. See also Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Willing, 200.

⁵³ See Arendt, «What is Freedom», 159; Arendt, *Diario filosófico*, 149; Arendt, *On Revolution*, 301-302n17; Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Willing, 198-200.

⁵⁴ Arendt, «What is Freedom?», 161.

⁵⁵ The Arendtian distinction at the start of chapter IV of *On Revolution* between constitutional governments and the foundation of freedom, appears to echo Montesquieu's statement which says that whilst freedom can only exist in moderate governments, it does not exist in all of them. In the Arendtian account of the American Revolution, the French writer appears as the inspiration for the *Constitutio libertatis* in the nascent republic, the only regime which, according to Arendt, has removed the concept of sovereignty from the body politic. See Arendt, *On Revolution*, 153 and Forti, *Vida del espíritu y tiempo de la polis*, 303.

⁵⁶ According to Arendt, Montesquieu seems to have been unaware of these classical references, focusing exclusively instead on the English Constitution to envision the doctrine of the separation of powers.

writer had discovered its characteristics. Conversely, it means acknowledging the fact that, together with Arendt, Montesquieu was alone in managing to articulate, or to put into words, the political experience of freedom. Duly equipped with these insights, Arendt would go on to definitively separate freedom from will, to criticize the linking of both to sovereignty, and to establish that we can only talk of freedom when the many – through words and deeds – manage to institute a space such «that one citizen could not be afraid of another»⁵⁷.

3. *Plurality Is the Law of the Earth*

Up to now I have tried to show how principle, experience, power, law and freedom—fundamental concepts of Arendtian vocabulary—are linked to her interpretation of Montesquieu. In this third section I wish to suggest that contact with the French writer also offers Arendt a discovery related to the *nature of politics*. In *The Human Condition*, she affirms:

Montesquieu realized that the outstanding characteristic of tyranny was that it rested on isolation – on the isolation of the tyrant from his subjects and the isolation of the subjects from each other through mutual fear and suspicion – and hence that tyranny was not one form of government among others but contradicted the essential human condition of plurality, the acting and speaking together, which is the condition of all forms of political organization. Tyranny prevents the development of power, not only in a particular segment of the public realm but in its entirety; it generates, in other words, impotence as naturally as other bodies politic generate power. This, in Montesquieu's interpretation, makes it necessary to assign it a special position in the theory of political bodies: it alone is unable to develop enough power to remain at all in the space of appearance, the public realm; on the contrary, it develops the germs of its own destruction the moment it comes into existence⁵⁸.

As I pointed out, through Montesquieu Arendt realizes that each regime is distinguished by a principle of action that, at the same time, rests on one of the few basic experiences that human beings have wherever they live together. I therefore suggested that these experiences are related – positively or negatively – with the *factum* of plurality, with the fact that it is not Man in singular but rather human beings in plural who inhabit the world and live on the earth. Following the trail of the Arendtian reading of Montesquieu, we discover that equality and distinction, articulated in principles of action compatible with the plural condition of human beings, manage to generate power and allow the regimes they belong to – the republic and the monarchy – to remain in «the space of appearance»; in other words, to reproduce themselves in lasting form. At the same time, this same interpretation leads us to affirm that there are other experiences that – because they separate human beings from the rest (isolation), or try to eliminate the plurality inherent to the two-in-one of thinking (loneliness) – from the very beginning contradict the plurality inherent in the human condition, «the acting and speaking together, which is the condition of all forms of political organization». As a result, claims Arendt, echoing Montesquieu, each form of domination that rests on them (tyranny and totalitarianism) bears «the germ of its own destruction»⁵⁹ right from the very beginning of its existence.

These reflections seem to oblige us to acknowledge the inescapable character of plurality; in other words, to consider that it is the indispensable element based on which an enduring form of life in common can be organized. In this sense, it seems possible to say that, through her reading of Montesquieu, Arendt discovers that the way each regime links to plurality – if the basic experience and principle of action are indeed compatible with plurality – provides the definitive criteria not only to distinguish between different forms of human coexistence, but also to establish a sort of hierarchy

⁵⁷ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, quoted in Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Willing, 199.

⁵⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 202-203.

⁵⁹ See Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 478.

amongst them, anchored in the distinction between political and anti-political ways of living together⁶⁰.

As Arendt says, the classical definition of forms of government, and with it, the answer as to which is the best regime, was not drawn up with an eye on the sphere of human affairs. Instead, it was founded against the contingency that characterizes it, based on the assumed superiority of philosophy over politics. Since Plato, the best regime has not been defined as one which favors freedom, but rather as one which most appropriately ensures the philosopher's security. In contrast to tradition, and in the vein of Montesquieu, Arendt discovers that we can address that subject by abiding by exclusively political criteria. In other words, by assuming that the highest forms of coexistence which, at the same time, have the best chances of lasting, are those that recognize that common life is determined by the existence of the many.

Conclusion

In the mid-1950s, Arendt observed that «If philosophers, despite their necessary estrangement from the everyday life of human affairs, were ever to arrive at a true political philosophy, they would have to make the plurality of man, out of which arises the whole realm of human affairs – in its grandeur and misery – the object of their *thaumadzein*»⁶¹. We can conclude now that for Arendt it is political writers and not philosophers who can fulfill this mission, albeit imperfectly. The picture painted here offers sufficient elements to maintain that, in the Arendtian interpretation, Montesquieu was able to pierce the carapace of tradition – the reduction of the many to One – to reach the plural heart of politics. Through contact with his work, Arendt began the journey that in 1964 led her to say that she wished to look at politics *with eyes unclouded by philosophy*; in other words, that tries to remove the concept of rule from the understanding of human affairs and to foreground, in a renewed way, the idea that the «*raison d'être*» of politics is freedom.

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⁶⁰ I believe that there is an underground link, inspired by Montesquieu, that runs through Arendt's work, pitting tyranny against freedom in relation to plurality as a constitutive element of the political. We can see some examples of this in the introduction to *On Revolution*, where Arendt maintains: «In a constellation that poses the threat of total annihilation through war against the hope for the emancipation of all mankind through revolution—leading one people after the other in swift succession 'to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them'—*no cause is left but the most ancient of all, the one, in fact, that from the beginning of our history has determined the very existence of politics, the cause of freedom versus tyranny*». Arendt, *On Revolution*, 11 (the italics are mine). The same is evident in «What is Freedom?», in the context of analyzing the principles of action and the importance of Montesquieu to examine this topic, where she affirms that «Freedom or its opposite appears in the world whenever such principles are actualized». Arendt, «What is Freedom?», 151. My interpretation of Arendt's reading of Montesquieu leads to similar conclusions to those reached by Margaret Canovan in the conclusion to her book. In it, Canovan reminds us that Arendt «Lecturing in 1955 on the history of political thought, . . . remarked that each of the key political thinkers of the past 'has thrown one word into our world, has augmented it by this one word, because he responded rightly and thoughtfully to certain decisively new experiences of his time». To which she adds: «After following her thought trains we must, I think, concede that in the course of her own response to the experiences of her time, Arendt also 'augmented' the world by one word: the word 'plurality.' The most fruitful way of reading her political thought is, I believe, to treat her analysis of modernity as a context for the interesting things she has to say about the fact that politics goes on among plural persons with space between them». Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*, 280-281.

⁶¹ Hannah Arendt, «Socrates», 38.

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