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ANQUETIL DUPERRON'S SEARCH FOR THE MUGHAL PUBLIC SPHERE: ORIENTALISM AS POLITICAL ECONOMY IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

Since the concept of the 'public sphere' entered historians' conceptual tool-kit some decades ago, scholars have debated whether or not public spheres exist, or have existed, in various moments of non-European history.¹ Such debates seem to have high stakes, given the association often made between the emergence of a public sphere in eighteenth-century Europe and the coming of cultural, economic and political modernity. For scholars working on contemporaneous societies outside Europe, demonstrating that Qing, Safavid and Mughal societies, possessed public spheres constituted by networks of gazette-readers or tea-house patrons appears to vindicate them as bearers of an autochthonous, authentic 'modernity' or 'early modernity'.² Such approaches challenge the historical narrative articulated by Jurgen Habermas in which the modern, 'bourgeois' public sphere emerged first, and perhaps could have emerged only, in Enlightenment Europe. Yet, ironically, the search for a public sphere outside of Europe was a feature of the eighteenth-century European intellectual scene Habermas sought to describe. It was pioneered by the French Indologist Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731-1805), who gathered diverse forms of evidence to demonstrate that various Asian states possessed a form of public life, and of political-economical discourse, akin to that of Europe.

Anquetil's study of the Mughal empire in particular anticipated much of the late twentieth- and twenty-first century scholarship on this question. Anquetil, like present-day scholars such as Margit Pernau, Yunus Jaffrey, Farhat Hasan and others, pointed to the existence of gazettes (*akhbarat*), and Persian-language works of history and statecraft (court histories and *akhlaqi* texts) as signs that Mughal politics was performed before an interested, informed public whose members measured the behavior of political actors against a set of shared norms. His study of the South Asian public sphere, long ignored even by the specialists who study Anquetil's

career as an Orientalist, spotlights neglected dimensions of the meaning and scope of the notion of the public sphere in the Enlightenment. Seen from Anquetil's vantage, the latter appears both more contentious and more globally-minded than its historians have imagined.

Against Montesquieu

Anquetil began his investigation of the Mughal public sphere in his 1778 *Législation Orientale*, a rebuttal to Montesquieu's 1748 *l'Esprit des Loix*, which had offered a complex and influential theory of publicness, although without explicitly giving a name to the 'public sphere'. Among other claims, Montesquieu claimed that public life not exist in South Asia. His understanding of publicness demonstrates the close connections between the economic and political thought of the European Enlightenment on the one hand, and the study of non-European societies on the other.³ Of course, it is by no means news to scholars that Montesquieu's descriptions of world outside Europe were critical parts of his analysis of three ideal-type regimes, each with their own distinct characteristics: republics, monarchies, and despotisms. Montesquieu identified this last category with Asian states, particularly the Mughal empire.⁴ He argued that a host of beneficent and inter-connected institutions, including private property, economic dynamism, and public life, were missing from 'Oriental despotisms'. Such positive structures were said to be incompatible with the absolute, unconstitutional power of an individual ruler. These economic and political phenomena, Montesquieu claimed, fell and rose together; one could not exist without the others. His analysis of South Asia as a region bereft of all of them thus incorporated real and imagined facts about the Subcontinent into a cogent vision of the way in which economic life was embedded in, and indeed inseparable from, political, social, and cultural forces.

This grand vision was unsatisfactory for Anquetil on at least two counts. First, it violated what the Orientalist knew (and what increasing numbers of present-day scholars know) about the Mughal state and the eighteenth-century South Asian economy. To describe the Mughal polity as 'constitutional' would be a stretch, but it is nevertheless the case that its rulers and agents were bound by semi-bureaucratic administrative structures, as well as norms of political culture embodied in diverse genres of texts. It is more difficult for contemporary historians to make

unambiguously well-substantiated claims about economic life in the Subcontinent during this period, but it is undeniable that diverse forms of property, both formal and informal, regulated the production, exchange, and use of goods.⁵ From his time in the port of Surat (1758-1761), a commercial hub on the Subcontinent's west coast, Anquetil was able to acquire deeds, contracts, and other economic documents testifying to how wrong Montesquieu was about the absence of property in the region. The Subcontinent, simply put, was not the Oriental despotism Montesquieu described.

If *Législation Orientale* (1778) is Anquetil's answer to Montesquieu's empirical claims about South Asia, the Orientalist seems to have been equally (albeit less explicitly) concerned about some of the theoretical and epistemological implications of the *Esprit des lois*. Montesquieu insisted that economic and political life were not timeless expressions of human nature governed by unchanging laws, but a historically contingent function of various cultural, social, and political factors. The economics and politics of Asian societies were to him radically incomparable with those of European ones. Montesquieu and those he influenced, such as the abbé Guillaume Raynal (1713-1796), the historian of colonialism, and the abbé Ferdinando Galiani (1728-1787), the political economist, followed their mentor's lead by focusing more on the differences among various human populations in particular times and places than in determining the universal features of humanity as such.⁶ They refused to treat economic activity as a domain bound by its own laws, or to separate distinctly 'economic' sorts of psychological motivations (e.g., self-interest or utility) from 'non-economic' ones (glory, virtue, passion, etc.) shaped by local cultures. Central to their analysis was Montesquieu's claim that the most powerful and beneficent sort of economic motives were tied to specific institutions present in 'constitutional' regimes (monarchies and republics) but absent in unconstitutional despotisms.

By the 1760s and 1770s, many thinkers were contesting Montesquieu's formulation that forms of economic life varied in the presence of absence of specific institutions. *Laissez-faire* thinkers and Physiocrats often tried to articulate economic 'laws,' which they understood to be founded in nature and therefore not to change from one society to another. Many argued, in contrast to Montesquieu, that peoples all across the world engaged in trade, owned property, and responded to the same sort of economic incentives. The classic expression of this burgeoning confidence in the existence of a trans-historical economic dimension to human nature is

Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776), but it also appeared in a range of French texts that are today known only to specialists. These include the debate between the Montesquian abbé Galiani and the liberal economist André Morellet (1727-1819; he translated *Wealth of Nations* into French the year of its publication, and who is himself cited therein on a number of occasions) over the merits of the deregulation of the French grain trade.⁷ As Steven Kaplan observes, the French state's shift toward a *laissez-faire* policy on this all-important commodity opened a rift among the 'party of Enlightenment', bringing once-abstract arguments about the nature of economic life into the center of political contention.⁸ These arguments would only grow more intense in subsequent decades, peaking during the first years of the Revolution.

Bringing his Indological expertise to bear in these economic debates, Anquetil offered a liberal alternative to the vision of Asian despotism developed by Montesquieu. Where the latter had used stereotypes of the Mughal empire to buttress theories about the variability of forms of economic life across space and time, Anquetil used his detailed knowledge of Mughal administration and South Asian commerce to support the proposition that all societies, whatever their culture and form of government, fostered property rights, markets, and emulation. Still more daringly, on the eve of the French Revolution he would offer the Subcontinent as a model for the economic and social reforms in his own country. Such timely contributions might have been welcomed by political economists pleased to see their theories on the universality of economic law confirmed by the evidence amassed by France's leading Orientalist. Instead, Anquetil's *Législation* and subsequent works on political economy were ignored, and have continued to be neglected by historians of the eighteenth-century who have not integrated the claims about Asian societies made by Montesquieu, Anquetil, and others into the history of economic thought. For Montesquieu, the study of political economy was inseparable from Orientalist knowledge about ostensibly non-economic institutions such as the public sphere, but, by the late eighteenth-century, it was increasingly unclear how facts (even true ones) about non-European societies might be relevant to liberal thinkers who conceived of political economy as a domain of universal laws. Anquetil's search for the Mughal public sphere, along with his efforts to make his findings speak to contemporary debates in French politics, reveal the growing tensions within the late Enlightenment between universalism and the study of the world.

Despotism and the Public Sphere

Montesquieu's vision of Oriental despotism terrified French readers, inspiring them both to disparage Asia and to be on perpetual watch against signs of despotism in their own country. Of course, these readers did not always agree on what exactly it was they were to watch out for, or what exactly they were trying to defend. Montesquieu himself identified resistance to despotism with the preservation of the French monarchy's 'constitution,' *i.e.*, the prerogatives of nobles such as himself and the *parlement* of which he was a member. More radical opponents of despotism believed that the nobles and their privileges were themselves despotic; by 1789 it seemed to many that only the abolition of the nobility could save France from the menace of despotism as bad as that of Asian states. If the fear of despotism structured the political culture of late-eighteenth century France, defining 'public enemy number one' for a wide range of political activists (from conservative nobles to republican radicals), it was equally important for economic thought, because it described a set of connections among political and social institutions on the one hand, and economic life on the other. Among the most important, but at present least-studied, of these connections is that between the public sphere and the set of economic motives termed 'emulation.' Montesquieu argued despotic societies lacked public-ness and therefore could not sustain emulation, the inter-subjective psychological and social phenomenon he and other late eighteenth-century *philosophes* imagined to lay at the heart of economic dynamism.

The notion of emulation had been a part of the Western intellectual tradition since Classical Antiquity. Until the 1740s, it was generally understood as a form of competition-cum-comradeship experienced among soldiers fighting on the same side in war, or among artists working in the same medium.⁹ In the middle of the eighteenth-century, a circle of French intellectuals, economists, and politicians associated with Vincent de Gournay (1712-1759) began to promote the idea that emulation was also felt by economic actors.¹⁰ Thus, rather than being an expression of self-interest, which challenged the solidarity of existing communities, economic competition could be seen as a kind of team-building exercise. The Gournay circle and its followers, both in France and Britain, argued that *laissez-faire* policies and a robust public sphere, underwritten by a free press, were the best means of awakening emulation. While a nation-wide press would bind individuals together culturally, morally,

and politically, deregulated markets would provide the incentives for economic competition and therefore for growth. Montesquieu did not endorse the specific policy recommendations of the Gournay circle, but his work was instrumental in promoting the idea that emulation and economic growth depended on a public sphere, which in turn could only flourish under specific political conditions. Thus the purported absence of a public sphere in 'Oriental despotisms' seemed to explain what he, and many thinkers following him, took to be the relative stasis of Asian economies as compared to European ones.

Each of the three basic forms of political regimes identified by Montesquieu was associated with a certain psychological profile that he imagined to be common to individuals living under it. Inhabitants of despotic states, for example, were marked by fear born of their powerlessness to resist or predict the whims of their absolute ruler. They were particularly vulnerable in economic matters, because, as a matter of course, despots do not recognize their subjects' right to private property.¹¹ According to Montesquieu, the insecurity that subjects experience "strikes down courage and snuffs out the least feeling of ambition," including emulation.¹² Since the despot would always be capable of seizing the property of a wealthy individual or taking the life of any potential rival for power, there was no reason for individuals to work to distinguish or enrich themselves. Because "knowledge is dangerous there, and emulation baleful," they lead lives of isolation, unknown to each other and ignorant of the world.¹³ It is only logical, then, that insofar as it brings people into contact and promotes the exchange of ideas and examples, "commerce itself contradicts its [despotism's] laws."¹⁴ In an anticipation of present-day historiographical debates over the 'divergence' thesis (explaining why European economies experienced steady growth in the Industrial and perhaps early modern eras, while those of Asia did not), Montesquieu suggested that the presence of despotism in Asia explained why European trade was dynamic, while Asia stagnated.¹⁵

Besides being a theory of global economic divergence *avant la lettre*, Montesquieu's theory of Oriental despotism was also a theory of the public sphere. As Sharon Krause observes, in despotic societies, "while there is no private sphere from the standpoint of the subject, neither is there a public sphere. Indeed everything is private in despotism for everything is the private property of the despot." Because the despot does not recognize subjects' property rights, and capriciously expropriates their possessions, the inhabitants of despotic states lack the material and psychological

wherewithal to sustain a public sphere through their participation in institutions of civil society such as voluntary associations, corporations, etc. They are a “population ill-equipped for the deliberation and disputation that animate politics and that make the public sphere political.”¹⁶

Montesquieu’s claims about the correlative absences of the public sphere, private property, emulation and economic vitality in South Asia were critical parts of his intellectual project. Besides setting Europe in the pilot seat of history, they undermined the possibility of economic laws that could transcend the radical divisions among different sorts of political regimes and different sorts of human communities. As Céline Spector notes, “the differential anthropology of Montesquieu” rules out the discovery of such “universal human needs” as might offer a foundation for economic theory.¹⁷ For Montesquieu, the study of particular states such as the Mughal empire highlights at once the embeddedness of economic activity in politico-social institutions, as well as the wide range of variation among the economic life in different parts of the world. Anquetil challenged Montesquieu’s characterization of the Mughal empire as despotic, and seeking to prove that it possessed a public sphere, property rights, robust circuits of exchange, and emulation. In doing so, he too hoped to upend Montesquieu’s vision of economic life, revealing that there was a universal human nature from which a set of generally applicable economic norms could be derived.

News from Court

By Montesquieu’s logic, if the Mughal empire was not despotic, then it must have a public sphere. In his attempt to disprove this unflattering vision of South Asia, Anquetil therefore argued that Mughal emperors embraced and sustained a public sphere which they and their subjects understand as a forum in which political actions could be judged. He pointed to the existence of “schools and public libraries” throughout the Subcontinent, showing that such institutions were filled with Persian-language works of history (Persian was the language of South Asian elites, and the only regional language Anquetil read with ease).¹⁸ Among the most important of these was the *Akbarnama*, a account of Akbar’s reign (1556-1605) written by that emperor’s chief minister Abu’l Fazl (1574-1602). Anquetil translated passages that listed the functions of various officials, with the aim of showing that Mughal government’s workings were public knowledge.

He was impressed that Abu'l Fazl recommended officials to read works of history, politics and ethics, so that administrators themselves would be well-informed, as well as committed to moral norms of governance. While Anquetil did not mention the genre of *akhlaq* by name, he seems, like Muzaffar Alam today, to have observed that such texts informed Mughal political culture, providing a set of standards against which political actors could be measured, and constituting part of the textual and normative foundation of the South Asian public sphere.¹⁹

The heart of the Mughal public sphere, Anquetil argued, was not so much in these texts as in the emperor's meetings with his ministers, the *darbar*, as well as the gazettes, or *akhbarat*, that reported on these meetings to readers across South Asia. Anquetil had never been to court himself, but relying on the reports of East India Company ambassador Thomas Roe (1581-1644) and traveler François Bernier (1620-1688), reported that "the most important resolutions are taken and registered in public." He described these *akhbarat* in which news of the *darbar* was transmitted as *nouvelles publiques* (public news), which expressed in plain, direct language what had transpired at court: "not in this inflated style for which Asians are reproached."²⁰ Anquetil compared these gazettes with French newsletters, distinguishing them from mere *registres* (registers) that might only circulate among members of the court. Mughal gazettes were sent out to "subscribers... as in France" and went even to the edges of the empire.²¹ The gazettes began by noting what ministers were present at court, allowing readers to know who was in and who was out of the *conseil d'état* (counsel of state; the name of the French king's group of advisors). They then listed the requests presented to the ministers, and the ministers' responses: goods were bought and sold, *fakirs* (religious mendicants) given grants, armies raised, etc. Where Montesquieu's imaginary Asian despot was "uneasy" about public surveillance of his actions, the Mughal emperor pursued it.²² Readers of *L'Esprit des lois* had never heard of anything like *akhbarat* existing in an 'Oriental despotism'; Anquetil noted: "what I am saying here is new."²³ In order to verify his novel claims, he attached a translation of a gazette that he had come across while in Surat. Dating from 1742, this document was not particularly significant in its content, which mostly conveyed information about the number and quality of elephants and lions at court.²⁴ In its very everydayness, however, this document may have made Anquetil's case better than a more spectacular document.

Anquetil's interpretation of the *akhbarat*, *darbar* ceremonial, *akhlaqi* texts, and Mughal court histories played on Montesquieu's own logic.

Since the Subcontinent could be shown to possess historiography, libraries, and gazettes, the Mughal empire must have a public sphere, and could not be despotic. In light of the intimate connections Montesquieu had drawn between such political and social institutions on the one hand and economic life on the other, it followed that, if there was a public sphere in South Asia, there would also be civil society, property rights, emulation, and economic dynamism. Anquetil furthered the point by appending translations of bill of sale and deeds to *Législation Orientale*, showing that contracts (and thus property) were indeed known in South Asia. This was by no means a simple act of setting the record on the Subcontinent straight. Throughout his career, Anquetil was deeply concerned by economic questions, and sought to prove that liberal economic policy was founded in human nature, which gave rise to markets, property, and emulation in all societies throughout the world. Anquetil's search for the public sphere in South Asia was inseparable from his advocacy of *laissez-faire* in France.

Caste, Estate and Emulation

Having demonstrated, at least to his own satisfaction, the existence of a public sphere in South Asia, Anquetil turned in the following decade to a new kind of comparative project: using the Subcontinent as a model for France. In 1789, as a through-going reform of French society appeared to be imminent, he published *Dignité du commerce et de l'état du commerçant*, which called for the end to nobles' privileges and promoted commerce as a legitimate occupation for all individuals, whatever their station in society.²⁵ This document was in some ways a late-comer to an argument which had peaked in the 1750s.²⁶ Known as the *noblesse commerçante* (commercial nobility) debate, it had hinged on the question of whether or not to continue a long-standing ban on noble participation in retail trade. Nobles involved in the latter could find themselves faced with *dérogance*: the loss of their privileged legal status. Theoretically, they were to be prevented from engaging in trade in order to focus on military service, which was said to be their primary function in French society. The notion that the clergy (First Estate) prayed, the nobility (Second Estate) fought, and everyone else (Third Estate) worked, however, seemed increasingly out-of-date by the mid-eighteenth century; national wealth was coming to be seen as at least as important as military service to the security of the state.²⁷

Nevertheless, traditionalists won the day, at least initially, preserving the law of *dérogance* and, with the Ségur Ordinance of 1782, tightening the nobles' hold on upper-level officer positions in the French military. Yet just seven years later *dérogance*, the theory of the three estates, and survival of a privileged nobility were in doubt. Anquetil updated the debate of the 1750s for the revolutionary era by calling for an end to noble's financial privileges in language approximating the Abbé Sieyès' (1748-1836) fiery pamphlet "What is the Third Estate?," also published in 1789.²⁸ But he was still on familiar ground. In fact, confronting the major arguments in favor of nobles' privileges and *dérogance* meant revisiting Montesquieu, whose *l'Esprit des Lois* had grounded the defense of a privileged, non-commercial nobility in a complex, inter-locking set of arguments about the public sphere, emulation, and Asiatic despotism.

The institution of a privileged nobility, Montesquieu claimed, was a spur to the emulation of non-nobles. Merchants who amassed a great deal of wealth might see their descendants ennobled by state service, the purchase of venal office, or through marriage into titled families. Entering the Second Estate, they would have to forgo the commercial activity that had enriched them, but they would gain as a reward the most esteemed sort of public visibility, enjoying proximity to the monarch whose gaze was the center of the French public sphere during the Old Regime. Non-noble merchants would not work as hard to amass wealth if they could not hope at some point to purchase their way into a more honorable and more public status. In support of his argument that social climbing was the foundation of commerce, Montesquieu pointed to the counter-example offered by despotic societies such as India. There rulers had put in place a caste system through "laws that force individuals to remain their professions, and pass these on to their children, are not and cannot be useful except in despotic state, in which no one can or should have any emulation."²⁹

For Anquetil, as for so many observers in 1789, this was nonsense. The privileges held by nobles were inherently unjust, composed of "feudal rights" on peasant labor, and tax exemptions that were nothing more than a hidden tax on non-nobles.³⁰ Such privileges were a drag on the economy. Nobles, Anquetil argued, should work for the material benefit of the nation just like everyone else in French society, and should stop hindering the economic activity of non-nobles. In spite of his strident language, however, Anquetil sought to preserve the Second Estate, albeit with diminished privileges and with an end both to *dérogance* and the

ennoblement of bourgeois families. The possibility of becoming noble had distracted members of the Third Estate from their own professions, making them dissatisfied and unfocused. Rather than investing their capital in business affairs that might contribute to the growth of the national economy, they frittered it away trying to keep up “the retinue of a captain of the cavalry.”³¹

These arguments echoed those of Sieyès’, the radical priest whose pamphlet ‘What is the Third Estate?’ also lambasted the uselessness of the nobility. As William Sewell notes, Sieyès’ political thinking was anchored in the principles of post-Smithian political economy; he was convinced that the division of labor was the key to economic and social progress, and that all members of society should contribute through their work to the general good. Nobles’ traditional roles as military officers and members of the court did not count as useful labor in Sieyès’ schema (although the abbé held that bourgeois politicians were performing ‘representative labor’).³² Anquetil, too, stood by the principles of utility and the division of labor as a means to progress; he grounded them, however, not only in the abstractions of political economy but also in empirical studies of South Asian society. In opposition to Montesquieu’s vision of the economics of the Subcontinent’s caste system, Anquetil insisted that South Asia had a bustling economy, under-girded by property rights and a public sphere. Where Montesquieu had used Orientalist knowledge drawn from the reports of travelers to prop up a theory of political economy that justified noble privilege, Anquetil invoked his own Indological expertise to advance a peculiarly Orientalized political agenda, transforming France into an enlightened caste society.

Caste, according to Anquetil, was the model of a healthy civil society. Individuals born into a caste, and thus a profession, could not hope to advance to a more honorable estate; their economic activity was not motivated by such non-economic considerations. Rather, they were prompted solely by an “emulation,” detached from honor, to improve their products, increase their yields, and enrich themselves. This honorless emulation was concerned solely with material advancement were expressions of an economic psychology common to all human beings, for “emulation should be found and in fact is found in more or less all states.”³³ Precisely because this emulation was natural and universal, it did not require encouragement by the state in the form of social gradations through which ambitions individuals could pass to greater and greater levels of public esteem. In a reformed French society where individuals

from the Third Estate could no longer hope to attain nobility and abandon useful work, emulation would not wither as Montesquieu had foreseen. The case of South Asia proved that whether or not individuals are free to change their professions (through ennoblement or through other means), emulation pushes them to “succeed” by amassing personal wealth and contributing to their nation’s prosperity.³⁴

This effort to present emulation as a basic feature of human psychology (rather than as an affect tied to particular institutions present in some societies but not in others) might have been appealing to fellow liberals, yet Anquetil’s parallels between caste and estate would have been scarcely palatable for potential readers. The South Asian caste system and the division of Old Regime society into three estates were often compared in the late 1780s, but these comparisons were always made in order to attack the existence of separate estates. Commentators both famous and obscure, writing in erudite treatises or fly-by-night pamphlets, condemned the clergy and especially the nobility as ‘castes.’ The most important of these was doubtless Sieyès, who insisted on the inherent dignity of commercial activity, seeing it as the source of the nation’s strength. Both thinkers called on nobles to abandon their prejudices against trade and become useful members of French society. Unlike Anquetil, however, Sieyès had no patience with the “exclusive caste, separated from the Third which it despises”; he doubted whether this caste could be considered part of the nation it did so little to serve.³⁵

Whether or not Anquetil was right (as some present-day historians of South Asia suggest) to describe early modern caste as a kind of civil society that structured rather than stifled economic life in the Subcontinent, his comments were hardly what the Old Regime’s critics wanted to hear.³⁶ Moreover, Anquetil made no effort to explain why the nobility should continue to exist as a separate estate even as its members were to become indistinguishable in practice from the commercial Third Estate. Sieyès’ denunciation of the noble ‘caste’, however wrong-headed its grasp of the caste system in South Asia may have been, was clear and consistent, which is more than can be said for Anquetil’s desire to preserve the Second Estate while depriving it of all the specific qualities that made it what it was.

Anquetil's Unpopularity

Twenty-first century scholars would no doubt find that Anquetil's vision of caste as a means of organizing something like a civil society is closer to the truth than the views of Montesquieu or Sieyès. His sense of *akhbarat* and other Mughal institutions as pillars of public life has likewise reemerged in contemporary studies of early modern South Asia. Margit Pernau and Yunus Jaffrey echo Anquetil when they place *akhbarat* at the center of the "creation of knowledge and of the public sphere."³⁷ Jaswant Lal Mehta, in his otherwise scathing critique of the Mughal empire as an Oriental despotism straight out of Montesquieu, says that by permitting the circulation of *akhbarat*, "though despotic rulers, the imperial Mughals... placed the entire monarchical apparatus to the full gaze of their subjects."³⁸ Anquetil's claims about the South Asian economy also seem increasingly verified, as scholars like Prannan Parthasarathi and Tirthankar Roy point to the security of peasant tenure, workers' rights, and urban property in seventeenth and eighteenth-century South Asia. Yet, in their own day, *Législation Orientale*, *Eloge du commerce*, and Anquetil's other political writings had little impact. Why did his work fail to inspire his contemporaries?

Scholars have argued that Anquetil was an anti-Eurocentric radical, an untimely thinker who could not find an audience because he strayed too far from the prejudices of his day.³⁹ Henry Laurens, for example, argues that Anquetil's "ideas were scarcely heard, because they did not correspond to the dominant current of liberalism."⁴⁰ Given Anquetil's investment in the liberal economic thought of his day, and his explicit yoking of fashionable political causes to his study of South Asia, this explanation is untenable. What seems to have condemned Anquetil's writings to obscurity is their own conceptual confusion, which is particularly glaring in his engagement with Montesquieu.⁴¹ Anquetil sought to discredit the notion of Asiatic despotism, but he failed to understand the concept he attacked, eliding some of the issues most important to Montesquieu and his readers. Anquetil posited that the Mughal state was a monarchy akin to that of France, which, of course, had a powerful group of hereditary officials: the nobles of the robe and sword.⁴²

In trying to assimilate the Mughal state to the French monarchy Anquetil ignored the difference between them that vexed Montesquieu: the relative weakness of Mughal elites *vis-à-vis* the emperor. In contrast to French nobles, who enjoyed hereditary titles and access to institutions

like the *parlements*, Mughal elites held their offices, titles and lands only at the emperor's pleasure.⁴³ Since the mid-sixteenth century, the Mughal state had been moving toward a more bureaucratic model of government, converting elites from semi-feudal nobles into salaried officials. This process of state-building defied Montesquieu's prescriptions for proper monarchical government. Indeed, the relationship between the ruler and elites is the crux of Montesquieu's distinction between monarchies and despotisms: the former accept elites' hereditary privileges as part of the constitution of the realm, the latter assault those privileges. Anquetil does not seem to have grasped this central point, making his attacks on the theory of 'Oriental despotism' to a certain extent moot.

Here Anquetil wavers between two propositions. On the one hand, he argues that the Mughal empire conforms to Montesquieu's model of a monarchical state, as evidenced by the existence of a set of specific institutions in South Asia (gazettes, public councils, property rights, etc.). On the other, he argues that there is and can be no such thing as despotism anywhere in the world; it is "a government that exists nowhere."⁴⁴ Montesquieu's effort to classify states by type is bound to fail, Anquetil insists, because human beings everywhere live in basically similar sorts of society, organized by common forms of public-ness and economic life. Perhaps these two propositions are not ultimately incompatible. In his sympathetic interpretation of Anquetil as a cosmopolitan liberal, Siep Stuurman observes that the Orientalist alternately employed an "anthropological and historicist" mode of an analysis and a "moral and universal" one.⁴⁵ Stuurman does not see these two strands of Anquetil's thought as contradictory; the *a priori* conviction that "all peoples of the world have the same basic needs and faculties" and the specific empirical claim that they live in the same basic sort of communities is simply confirmed by a rich variety of cases.⁴⁶ Stuurman does not attend, however, to the effects that Anquetil's employment of universalist and historicist discourses would have had on readers who had their own expectations about the way concrete 'facts' about particular societies ought to relate to laws of human behavior.

The tension between these modes was particularly acute in late eighteenth-century French political economy. Historians have long noted a marked contrast between the epistemological assumptions of the *laissez-faire* thinkers that descended from the Gournay Circle, and the more nebulous group of their opponents, influenced by Montesquieu, who included the abbé Galiani, Jacques Necker, and Denis Diderot. The former

emphasized the systematic, *a priori* quality of economic knowledge. Their thought, as Jean-Claude Perrot notes, was centered on “the notion of the individual... with universal, invariable attributes.”⁴⁷ The latter, hewing to an older mercantilist tradition, saw such knowledge as a body of facts, cases, and rules of thumb rather than a set of general principles.

For such liberals as André Morellet, an influential member of the Gournay Circle, individual cases were of little importance, provided one had correctly understood human nature and the economic laws that emerged from it. In a 1771 letter to the Italian *laissez-faire* economist Pietro Verri, Morellet dismissed the idea (promoted by Montesquieu, Raynal, and, from a liberal perspective, Anquetil himself) that the French government could not determine the proper policy for trade between India and France unless it carefully studied the facts of economic life in South Asia. Morellet knew *a priori* that the *Compagnie des Indes Orientales* was inefficient and that deregulated “private trade” would work better, because he understood the universal principles of political economy. Why test these principles against specific cases? Even when the former “are belied by some particular facts, that is not, in my judgment, a reason to put them in doubt.”⁴⁸

Who, then would be the audience for Anquetil’s facts about political institutions and economic life in South Asia? Liberals who shared his belief in a universal human nature with economic attributes had little epistemic imperative to search for “certain particular facts” in the archives of Surat. This tension between what Stuurman calls “anthropological and historicist” fact-gathering and the liberal belief in ‘economic man’ hangs over Anquetil’s failure. His late eighteenth-century search for the Mughal public outside of Europe was a response to, and continuation to Montesquieu’s project of an anthropological, historicist, and global political economy. It seems that such a project, however revised, could not be coupled with the principles of liberal political economy. By the century’s end, the Orientalist knowledge Anquetil provided no longer seemed reconcilable with the economic knowledge embodied in his allies’ principles.

NOTES

- ¹ Debates over the existence of a non-European public sphere peaked at different moments in different regional fields, and each of the latter had its own peculiar contours. The China field turned to this question quite early, with a special issue of *Modern China* devoted to this question in 1993. See Philip C.C. Huang, "Public Sphere /"Civil Society" in China?: The Third Realm between State and Society" *Modern China*, 01/1993, 19(2): 216-240; Mary. Rankin, "Some Observations on a Chinese Public Sphere" *ibid.*: 158-182; Frederick Wakeman "The Civil Society and Public Sphere Debate" *ibid.*: 108-139. The debate remains generative of important scholarly works, e.g. Eugenia Lean *Public Passions: the Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

On the Islamic public sphere, see Miriam Hoexter, S. N. Eisenstadt, and Nehemia Levtzion, *The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002); *Citizenship and the State in the Middle East: Approaches and Applications*, ed. Nils Butenschon, Uri Davis, and Manuel Hassassian, (Syracuse: University Press, 2000); Ellen McLarney, "The Islamic Public Sphere and the Discipline of 'Adab" *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Aug. 2011) , pp. 429-449; Armando Salvatore, *The Public Sphere: Liberal Modernity, Catholicism, Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). The 'classic' scholarly disavowal of the very possibility of an Islamic public sphere (and of civil society, secular modernity, and so on) is Ernest Gellner *Muslim Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

Less has been written specifically on the public sphere of Mughal and post-Mughal South Asia. See Margrit Pernau and Yunus Jaffrey *Information and the Public Sphere : Persian Newsletters from Mughal Delhi*, (New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 2009); Farhat Hasan's essay "Forms of Civility and Publicness in Pre-British India" in *Civil Society, Public Sphere, and Citizenship : Dialogues and Perceptions*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava, Helmut Reifeld (New Delhi ; Thousand Oaks: 2005), p. 84-105. See also Margrit Pernau, "The Delhi Akhbar: Between Persian Akhbarat and English Newspaper", *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, vol. 18 (2003), p. 105-131.

For debates on the nature of the public sphere in contemporary India, with reference to Mughal and colonial history, see Richa Tiwari, "Habermas' Views on the Significance of the Public Sphere in a Democracy: Its Possible Relevance in Understanding the Public Sphere in India" *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (July-Sept., 2006), p. 639-650; Amir Ali Evolution of Public Sphere in India *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 36, No. 26 (Jun. 30 - Jul. 6, 2001), p. 2419-2425

- ² On the notion of early modernity in South Asia, see J.A. Goldstone, "The Problem of the 'Early Modern' World," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41, 3 (1998), p. 249-284; J.F. Richards, 'Early Modern India and World History', *Journal of World History* 8, 2 (1997), pp. 197-209; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Hearing Voices: Vignettes of Early Modernity in South Asia, 1400-1750," *Daedalus* vol. 127, 3, (Summer, 1998), p. 75-104; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories: Notes Towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia," *Modern Asian Studies*, 31, 3 (1997), p. 735-762.
- ³ For Montesquieu as an economic thinker, Céline Spector, *Montesquieu et l'émergence de l'économie politique* (Paris :Honoré Champion, 2006).
- ⁴ On Montesquieu's thinking on Oriental despotism: Perry Anderson, *The Lineages of the Absolutist State*, (London: New Left Books, 1974), 462-3; Louis Althusser, *Montesquieu. Le Politique et l'Histoire* (Paris: PUF, 1959), 92; David Young "Montesquieu's view of despotism and his use of travel literature," *The Review of Politics*, vol. 40, 3 (1978), p. 392-405; Thomas Kaiser "The Evil Empire? The Debate on Turkish Despotism in Eighteenth-Century French Political Culture," *The Journal of Modern History*, v. 72, 1 (March 2000), p. 6-34.
- For Oriental despotism in French political culture, see Frederick Whelan, "Oriental Despotism: Anquetil-Duperron's Response to Montesquieu," *History of Political Thought*, vol. 22, (Winter 2001), p. 619-647. On European notions of Oriental despotism, see Alain Grosrichard *Structure du sérail: la fiction du despotisme asiatique dans l'Occident classique*, (Paris: Seuil, 1979); Joan-Pau Rubiés, "Oriental Despotism and European Orientalism: Botero to Montesquieu," *Journal of Early Modern History*, 9 (1-2), p. 109-180; Franco Venturi "Oriental Despotism" *Journal of the History of Ideas* Vol. 24, No. 1 (Jan. - Mar., 1963), p. 133-142.
- For French views of South Asia in the eighteenth-century, Kate Marsh, *India in the French Imagination: Peripheral Voices, 1754-1815*, (London, Pickering & Chatto, 2009); Indra Mukhopadhyay, "Imperial Ellipses: France, India, and the Critical Imagination", Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California Los Angeles, Department of Comparative Literature (2008); Florence D'Souza, *Quand la France découvrit l'Inde: les écrivains-voyageurs français en Inde (1757-1818)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995).
- ⁵ Prasannan Parthasarathi, *Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia did not: Global Economic Divergence, 1600-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Tirthankar Roy, *An Economic History of Early Modern India* (London: Routledge, 2013).
- ⁶ Francine Markovits, *L'Ordre des échanges: philosophie de l'économie et économie du discours*, (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1986), p. 298-307.

- 7 Richard Whatmore, "Adam Smith and the French Revolution," *Past and Present*, vol. 175 (2002), p. 65-89. Steven L. Kaplan, *La Bagarre: Galiani's "Lost" Parody* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff; 1979).
- 8 Steven L. Kaplan, *Bread, Politics, and Political Economy in the Reign of Louis XV* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976).
- 9 Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation State in Historical Perspective*, (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005); Sophus Reinert, *Translating Empire: Emulation and the Origins of Political Economy*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).
- 10 *Le Cercle de Vincent de Gournay Savoirs économiques et pratiques administratives en France au milieu du XVIIIe siècle*, eds. Loïc Charles, Frédéric Lefebvre and Christine Théré (Paris: Institut National d'Etudes Démographiques, 2011); Catherine Larrère, *L'Invention de l'économie au XVIIIe siècle. Du droit naturel à la physiocratie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1992); Simone Meysonnier *La Balance et l'horloge: la genèse de la pensée libérale en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Montreuil: Editions de la Passion, 1989); Antoine Murphy and Michel Bertrand, "Le développement des idées économiques en France, 1750-1756," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 33, 4 (Oct-Dec. 1986), p. 521-541.
- 11 On the existence of private property in South Asia, see D. Kumar, "Private Property in Asia: the Case of Medieval South India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 27, 2 (Apr. 1985), p. 340-366.
- 12 Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, *Oeuvres complètes*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1949-1950), vol. 2, *De l'Esprit des lois*, p. 258.
- 13 Montesquieu, p. 265.
- 14 Montesquieu, p. 671.
- 15 André Gunder Frank, *Reorient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Kenneth Pomeranz, *Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).
- 16 Sharon Krause, "Despotism in the Spirit of the Laws" in *Montesquieu's Science of Politics*, ed. David Wallace Carrithers, Michael A. Mosher, Paul Anthony Rahe, (Lanham MA: and Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2001), p. 231-271, 241-242.
- 17 Céline Spector, *Montesquieu et l'émergence de l'économie politique* (Paris :Honoré Champion, 2006), p. 74.
- 18 *Législation*, p. 38.
- On Mughal history-writing and its antecedents, see Lisa Balabanilar, *Imperial Identity in the Mughal Empire: Memory and Dynastic Politics in Early Modern South and Central Asia*, (London: I. B. Taurus, 2012); Muzaffar Alam and

- Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Writing the Mughal World: Studies on Culture and Politics*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Witnesses and Agents of Empire: Eighteenth-Century Historiography and the World of the Mughal Munshī," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 53, No. 1/2 (2010), p. 393-423; M. Athar Ali, "The Use of Sources in Mughal Historiography" *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 5, 3, (Nov 1995), p. 361-373. Older but still useful works include Harbans Mukhia *Historians and Historiography During the Reign of Akbar*, (New Delhi: Vikas Publication House, 1976); Jagdish Narayan Sarkar, *History of History-Writing in Medieval India*, (Calcutta: Ratna Prakahan, 1977).
- ¹⁹ Muzaffar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam: India, 1200-1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
- ²⁰ Roe, p 9-10. Bernier, *Voyage*, v. 2, 48. On Bernier see Sylvia Murr, "Le 'politique au Mogol' selon Bernier: appareil conceptuel, rhétorique stratégique, philosophie morale" *Purushartha 13: De la Royauté à l'Etat dans le monde indien* (Paris: Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1991): 239-311; Jean-Charles Darmon, "Prudence politique et droit de propriété privée semon Bernier: pour une analyse utilitariste de décadence des Etats du Grand Mogol," in *Libertinage et philosophie au XVIIe siècle*, 3, ed. Antony McKena and Pierre-François Moreau (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 1999), p. 123-142; Joan-Pau Rubiés, "Race, climate and civilization in the works of François Bernier," in *Purushartha 31: L'Inde des Lumières: Discours, histoire, savoirs, XVIIe-XIXe siècle*, ed. Marie Fourcade and Ines Zupanov (Paris: Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 2013), p. 13-38. See also Nicholas Dew, *Orientalism in Louis XIV's France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- ²¹ On *akhbarat*, see Michael Fischer, "The Office of Akhbar Nawis: the Transition from Mughal to British Forms" *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 27, 1, (1993), p. 45-82. On 'news' more generally in early modern South Asia, see Gagan D.S. Sood "The Informational Fabric of Eighteenth-Century India and the Middle East: Courriers, Intermediaries, and Postal Communication" *Modern Asian Studies*, 43, 5, (Sept. 2009), p. 1085-1116; Christopher A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Irfan Habib, 'Postal Communications in Mughal India', Proceedings of the Indian Historical Congress, 46th Session (Delhi, 1986), p. 236-252.
- ²² *Législation*, p. 43.
- ²³ *Législation*, p. 41. Anquetil was not, strictly speaking, the first European to discuss the *akhbarat*. Nicola Manucci, a seventeenth-century traveler to South Asia, mentioned them in his writings, but did not see them as having

any particular importance or bearing on arguments about the nature of the Mughal state. See Fisher, p. 50-52.

24 *Législation*, p. 193-200.

25 Jacqueline Hecht "Un problème de population active au XVIII^e siècle en France. La querelle de la noblesse commerçante" *Population*, vol. 19, 2 (1964), p. 267-290.

26 On the so-called *noblesse commerçante* debate see Jay M. Smith, *Nobility Reimagined: the Patriotic Nation in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

27 On the changing vocabulary with which French society was talked about by its members in the late-eighteenth century, see Sarah Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); William Sewell, *Languages of Labor*; *ibid.*, "Etats, Corps et Ordres: Some Notes on the Social Vocabulary of the French Old Regime," *Sozialgeschichte Heute* (Festschrift H. Rosenberg) (Göttingen, 1974); Roland Mousnier, "Les concepts d'ordres, d'états, de fidélité et de monarchie absolue en France de la fin du X^e siècle à la fin du XVIII^e siècle," *Revue historique*, 502 (Apr.-Jun. 1972), p. 289-312. On the medieval origins of the myth of a tripartite division of French society into Estates, see Georges Dubuy *Les trois ordres ou l'imaginaire du féodalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).

28 On Sieyès and "What is the Third Estate?" see: Jacques Guilhamou, *Sieyès et l'ordre de la langue: l'invention de la politique moderne* (Paris: Kimé, 2002); Pasquale Pasquino, *Sieyès et l'invention de la constitution en France* (Paris: O. Jacob, 1998); William Sewell, *A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution: the Abbé Sieyès and 'What is the Third Estate'?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994); Paul Bastid, *Sieyès et sa pensée* (Paris: Hachette, 1970 [1939])
 29 Montesquieu, p. 598.

30 *Législation*, p. 39.

On such 'feudal' rights, and the abolition during the Revolution, see: John Markoff, *Abolition of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords, and Legislators in the French Revolution* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010); Michael Fitzsimmons, *The Night the Old Regime Ended: August 4, 1789* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003); John Quentin Colborne Mackrell, *The Attack on Feudalism in Eighteenth-century France* (London: Routledge, 1973); D.M.G. Sutherland "Peasants, Lords, and Leviathan: Winners and Losers from the Abolition of French Feudalism, 1780-1820," *Journal of Economic History*, vol. 62, 1 (Mar. 2002), p. 1-24.

31 *Législation*, p. 31.

32 Sewell, *Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution*, p. 59.

33 *Législation*, 32.

34 *Législation*, 33.

- 35 Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers Etat?* (Paris: Editions du Boucher, 2002 [1789]), p. 29.
- 36 Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). See also Arjun Appadurai, "Is Homo Hierarchicus?," *American Ethnologist*, vol. 13 (1986): 745-61.
- 37 Pernau and Jaffrey, p. 2.
- 38 Jaswant Lal Mehta, *Advanced Study in the History of Medieval India*, v. 2 (New Delhi: Sterling, 1984), p. 29.
- 39 Edward Said "Raymond Schwab and the Romance of Ideas" *Daedalus*, v 105, 1 (Winter 1976), p. 151-167, 156-158. Jonathan Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution and Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 603. Siep Stuurman. "Cosmopolitan Egalitarianism in the Enlightenment: Anquetil Duperron on India and America," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 68, 2 (Apr. 2007), p. 255-278.
- 40 Henry Laurens, *Orientales I. Autour de l'expédition d'Egypte* (2004), p. 41-48, "La place de l'Orientalisme dans les sciences humaines du XVIII siècle," p. 44.
- 41 Lucette Valensi explores the confusion and unclarity in Anquetil's style and organization in "Eloge de l'Orient, Eloge de l'Orientalisme: le jeu d'échecs d'Anquetil Duperron," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, 4 (1995), p. 419-452.
- 42 Anquetil, p. 40.
- 43 Bernier infamously claimed that there was no private property in South Asia. This misunderstanding emerged from his observations of the Mughal court's practice of paying nobles in official service by assigning them specific domains (and the taxes attached to them) for life; upon their death these lands were supposed to revert to the emperor, who would assign them to another official. This system began to gradually break down in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, as imperial authority weakened and nobles converted their revenue-domains into hereditary fiefdoms. See John Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, Cambridge New History of India, I, 5, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). The status of non-noble land is an entirely separate question. South Asian peasants enjoyed varying degrees of security of tenure, through a number of different arrangements by which cultivators, village organizations, landlords, and agents of the state shared rights to the revenue of a given area. These arrangements were only rarely concerned with establishing property over the land itself, creating confusion for European observers. Bernier and his readers incorrectly drew the conclusion that there was no right to property in South Asia: a mistake with profound consequences for Orientalist thought and colonial practice. For late eighteenth-century British efforts to understand, and alter, South

Asian norms of land tenure, see Ranajit Guha, *Rule of Property for Bengal*; Jon E Wilson, "Governing Property, Making Law: Land, Local Society and Colonial Discourse in Agrarian Bengal, 1785-1830," PhD dissertation, Oxford, 2000; Robert Travers, "'The Real Value of the Lands': the Nawabs, the British, and the Land Tax in Eighteenth-Century Bengal," *Modern Asian Studies*, v. 38, 3 (July 2004): 517-558.

⁴⁴ Legislation Orientale, p. 4.

⁴⁵ Stuurman, p. 268.

⁴⁶ Stuurman, p. 269.

⁴⁷ Jean-Claude Perrot, *Une histoire intellectuelle de l'économie politique, XVIIe-XVIIIe siècle*, (Paris: Editions EHESS, 1992), p. 261.

⁴⁸ *Lettres d'André Morellet*, t. 1, 1759-1785, Letters 1-262, (The Voltaire Foundation: Oxford, 1991), ed. Dorothy Medlin, Jean-Claude David, Paul LeClerc, letter 52a, (20 Nov 1771), p. 153.