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THE MORALITY OF CONQUEST

One of the great problems of our time is how to behave toward a society that is different from our own. Rather than deal with this question in the abstract, I should like to present a particular case, truly exemplary: that of the first encounter between Europeans and Americans and, more specifically, the most spectacular illustration of it, the conquest of Mexico. By "exemplary" I do not at all mean that the behavior of our ancestors should be imitated; we know that the immediate result of that encounter was an extermination of human beings in proportions that had never been seen before and have never been attained afterward, in spite of the efforts made in this regard in the twentieth century. The conquest of America is exemplary in that it produced many varied and elaborated attitudes and that it gave rise to a wealth of texts that allow us to envisage the problem in all its complexity.

In Spain itself, the principal country engaged in the conquest, we see, as early as the 16th century, a great diversity of positions, as well as a continuous reflection on the question. The arguments perhaps reached their apogee in the public confrontation of two extreme opinions expressed in Valladolid in 1550. They were sustained by two eminent personages. On the one hand, there was

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Bartolomé de Las Casas, a Dominican, tireless defender of the Indians and denouncer of the crimes committed by the *conquistadores*. On the other hand, there was Juan Gines de Sepulveda, a man of letters, translator and commentator of Aristotle, defender of the intrinsic superiority of Christian Europe and advocate of the conquest in the name of European civilization.

For us today, the choice between these two positions seems easy to make: who would not prefer to support the generosity of Las Casas rather than what appears to us as the racism of Sepulveda? However, if we follow the controversy in its entirety we see that things are not so simple. Las Casas affirms the equality of all people, but he none the less does not abandon his conviction of the superiority of the Christian religion, which is his own; he is thus led to attribute characteristics of ideal Christians to the Indians. In other words, his egalitarianism leads him to an unconscious assimilationism, and the image of the Indians that we find in his works is relatively defective (even though he accumulates an impressive number of facts), because he has a tendency to leave out anything that would detract from his apologia, as well as to interpret his observations from the Christian viewpoint. For his part, Sepulveda is on the alert for differences, because he needs proof for his thesis of the superiority of the Europeans; he willingly stresses what Las Casas leaves in the dark: the absence of phonetic writing, draught-animals, money; sacrificial rites or cannibalism. However, his European prejudices prevent him from pursuing this topic further, and he is satisfied with a fleeting negative portrait. For completely different reasons, the knowledge of the Indians that we may derive from his writings is at least as unsatisfactory as that found in Las Casas' work.

After more than four hundred years, we cannot call it a draw between the adversaries of that time: the attitude of Las Casas is incontestably more worthy of admiration, and the thousands of pages he devoted to the Indians obviously has more weight than those few left by Sepulveda. None the less, the ambiguities present in both positions provoke reflection. In spite of all the differences that separated them, the noble assimilationism of Las Casas and the proud ethnocentrism of Sepulveda lead to the same end, which is ignorance of the Indians themselves. If one projects one's ideal on the other, one risks misunderstanding no less than if one

projects it on oneself. Or again, the egalitarian attitude is in danger of being transformed into an affirmation of identity; the perception of the superiority of one culture over the other. At the same time, we see that knowledge is not a neutral attitude, that we can oppose *en bloc* value judgments made of others: through its determinations and its consequences it is tightly enmeshed in the ethical position that we assume and the values we esteem. Science is not opposed to morality, since there is a morality of science.

The antagonism between Las Casas and Sepulveda is inconveniently extreme: their positions are hyperbolic and make the perception of nuances difficult. Perhaps it would be advantageous, in this regard, to draw back somewhat in time, but also in space, going from Spain to neighboring France. French philosophers and moralists frequently used the conquest of America as the theme of their reflections, and here I should like to analyze two of them, because they seem to me to be both complex and representative. They are those of Montaigne and Montesquieu.

II

Montaigne analyzed the conquest of Mexico (and Peru) in his essay *Des Coches* (III, 6) which after four centuries is admired by anti-colonialists. One of them, the historian Charles-André Julien, thus summarizes the common opinion: "In these noble and profoundly human pages, among the finest ever written, is affirmed with unequaled power the French tradition of the defense of the weak against the strong". In fact, does not Montaigne clearly express his condemnation of the Spanish conquerors, his regret that the conquest ever took place? "So many destroyed cities, so many exterminated nations, so many millions of people put to the sword, and the richest and most beautiful part of the world overthrown for commerce in pearls and pepper! Mechanical victories". However, when we read Montaigne's essay we find some difficulty in accepting this interpretation.

We cannot help being struck, in fact, because Montaigne seems to hesitate between two positions that are at first contradictory. Let us take as an example the questions relative to technological and material civilization. On the one hand, Montaigne remarks the lack of cleverness characteristic of the Indians with regard to the con-

struction of roads: "They had no means of transport except manual, dragging their loads; and not even the art of scaffolding, not knowing anything else than to pile earth against their building, as it rose, and afterward to take it away". On the other hand, in view of their botanical and zoological collections, he affirms the splendor of their cities and the fineness of their hand-work, that "neither do they yield to us in industry"; and the roads themselves inspire this judgment from him: "Neither Greece nor Rome nor Egypt can, be it in usefulness, or difficulty, or nobility, compare any of its works with the road which can be seen in Peru; "nobility" seems here to refer not only to the height of moral inspiration but also to technical perfection.

The same is true for descriptions concerning the moral plane. On one hand Montaigne writes, "never fell to Alexander or the ancient Greeks and Romans such a noble conquest, and such a great mutation and alteration of so many empires and peoples into hands that gently polished and reclaimed what was savage, and promoted and comforted the good harvests that nature produced there, not only mixing the culture of the land and ornament of the cities with the arts of Europe when that was necessary but also mixing Greek and Roman virtues with those that were original in the country!" We must understand by this that these peoples did not have all the necessary virtues and remained partly savage; and that an intervention of the colonial type was desirable, on the condition that it was conducted by those who possessed the abovementioned virtues. At the same time, Montaigne assures us that "they do not owe us anything in the clarity of a natural spirit and in pertinence," that they even surpassed us in "devotion, observance of the law, goodness, liberality, loyalty and frankness;" and that, as far as "fortitude and courage," "stability, constancy, determination in the face of death, hunger and pain" goes, they should be put on the same level as "the most famous ancient examples that we have in our memories of our world". However, are not these "ancients" the same as the Greeks and Romans evoked elsewhere, and are they anything else but the virtues enumerated here?

We have some difficulty, in fact, in deciding whether Montaigne considers these peoples as belonging to the infancy of humanity or not. It is a world, he writes, "so new and so young that they are still learning their abc's"; "it was still naked and at the breast and

lived only through the nourishment of its mother"; "it was an infant world;" these are "such new souls, so hungry for knowledge, having for the most part such fine natural beginnings!". On the other hand, having quoted a wise answer made by the king of the Mexicans, Montaigne ironically comments: "There is an example of the mumbling of this childishness!" Thus we do not know whether he himself believed it. Such a series of contradictions cannot be purely gratuitous.

We have the impression that Montaigne used accounts of the conquest of America to illustrate two independent theses; this is what brings about the discordance between his arguments. The first is that humanity lives on the model of the individual being (from which, *a posteriori*, come all the analogies between the savages and children): it has a childhood, an age of apprenticeship and an old age, characteristic of Montaigne's world. The second is that of the Golden Age, located very near the origins, since with time the marvelous naturalness becomes degraded and artificial; this is what allows the criticism, so frequent in Montaigne, of his own society. It is also this that is dominant in the essay *Des Coches* since the part relative to the conquest takes up only the second half. The first part is devoted to the condemnation of our own governors, contrasted with the wise kings of the American Indians.

In truth, we could, with some readjustments, reconcile the two theses: it would suffice to somewhat complicate the biological model (or the myth of the Golden Age) by adding a third moment, intermediary, between the Indians incarnating childhood and our own decadence: it would be the young maturity of the Greeks, a true Golden Age, to which the Indians are closer than we are but without participating in it, which would explain that while being superior to us they still have things to learn from the Greeks. Such an interpretation, however, would not take anything away from another aspect of Montaigne's demonstration, namely, that he uses the Indians to illustrate his theses concerning our own society rather than seeking to know the former. The same fact (for example, technical ignorance) could serve, according to the needs of the moment, one or the other thesis, indifferently; the Indians here are hardly more than an allegory. In addition, we perceive that empirical observations are rare in this dispute: neither the idea of the childhood of humanity nor that of its Golden Age has a foundation.

The description of the Indians is also striking for another trait that could be called their "atomism". Montaigne isolates their characteristics (taken from the account of the Spaniard Gomara) and evaluates them one by one. He brings up their "observance of the law" but never inquires into the reason for it or what significance it had in Indian society. The same is true for courage: that of the Indians is directly compared to that of the Greeks; it is an absolute value that is not influenced by circumstances. Likewise, their "indomitable ardor" or their "noble determination in suffering all extremes and difficulties". He brings up the fact that, contrary to us, they do not know gold as a universal equivalent: "The use of money was entirely unknown and consequently their gold was intact", while we "mill it and alter it into a thousand forms, we diffuse and disperse it", but aside from the implicit moral condemnation, this fact leads him to no conclusion concerning societies provided with such opposed characteristics. Sepulveda saw an indication of the level of civilization in the European use of gold.

The epistemological atomism of Montaigne is particularly striking in the explanation he gives for the result of the military encounter. The fact, as we know, is enigmatic: how can we explain that some hundreds of Spanish adventurers succeeded in overthrowing the powerful empires of Mexico and Peru, both of which had hundreds of thousands of warriors? Montaigne answers the question in a long discourse in which he imagines what would have had to be taken from the ones and given to the others so that the outcome of the struggle would have been different: not very much, according to him, if we suppress the ruses of the Spaniards, if they were deprived of metals and firearms, if at the same time we could put between parentheses the surprise of the Indians who had never seen such bizarre men or animals such as horses, if their arms (which were only stones, bows and arrows and sticks) were changed, when the outcome of the battle was uncertain: "Take this disparity into account, I say, and you take from the conquerors all possibility of victory". Thus in the end there was no Spanish superiority as such.

This reasoning gives us pause. Montaigne brings up the differences between the two societies, in behavior as well as in technology. However, he draws no conclusions from these differences with

regard to the societies they characterize. Metal-working or firearms did not, however, fall from the sky, with no rapport with the life of the peoples who were acquainted with them. The Indians were surprised, he says, "to see the unexpected arrival of bearded men, different in religion, language, form and countenance"; but why did not the Spaniards experience the same paralyzing effect when they encountered beardless men and, obviously, different in religion and language? The more rapid psychological adaptation as well as the technological superiority of the Spaniards are incontestable, and they are in correlation with the other characteristics of Spanish society of the time; how can they be removed without affecting its identity? The same for the Indians: perhaps there is a relationship between their "devotion" and "observance of the law", on the one hand, and the confusion brought about on seeing the unknown, the "other"? Montaigne seems to think it is logical that some traits of a civilization are essential and others incidental, and the latter may be "removed" at will, without putting the very identity of the social group in question. But who decides what is essence and what is incidental?

Alongside epistemological atomism, Montaigne practices what we could call an axiological (or ethical) "globalism". The description of Indian or European society endeavors to point out trait after trait, but the value judgment made by Montaigne is itself global: they are "our customs", in their entirety, that are characterized by "all sorts of inhumanity and cruelty", inversely from the customs of the Indians. Not only does each particular trait (for example, courage or devotion) always keep the same value, in all cases, but also his evaluation immediately extends to the rest of society: everything is good, or everything is decadent.

The knowledge of societies that we find in Montaigne's essay remains piecemeal, and it is in fact entirely subjected to his didactic intention, which is the criticism of *our* society; the *other* is never recognized in its identity, even if it is idealized to serve his purpose. It is not perhaps by chance that this negligence is accompanied by a political position that seems to us now the contrary of anti-colonialism: Montaigne is for a good colonization, one that would be made in the name of his ideals (incarnated by the Greeks and Romans); there is never a question of what the prospective colonized peoples themselves might think.

III

Montesquieu did not leave a continuous text devoted to the conquest. However, he had the intention to do so, if we may judge from a note in his *Pensées*: "I should like to make a judgment on the story of Hernando Cortés, by Solis, with reflections; I have them all done already". (796, Bkn. 104[1]). As Montaigne read and commented on Gomara, Montesquieu read Solis' account from the end of the 18th century and perhaps even envisaged a work comparable to *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence*. He did not write it, but the "reflections" in question are scattered throughout *De l'Esprit des lois* and *Mes Pensées*.

At first sight, Montesquieu's position with regard to the conquest is near to that of Montaigne: he also condemns what is "one of the great wounds that humanity has again received" (IV, 6); he thinks that the Spanish brought only superstitions, slavery and extermination, that they did only harm (X, 4); that their actions in America were nothing but "crimes" (XV, 4). However, if we examine the ensemble of his reflections, we discover quite a different attitude.

Let us again take the example of the reasons for the defeat of the Indians. Montaigne attributed it to the traits of Indian civilization, which he judged incidental, fortuitous and which we could have imagined replaced by opposite ones; the issue of combat itself did not appear as ineluctable. Montesquieu looks for these reasons in what are for him the constitutive traits of States such as Mexico and Peru. These States near the Equator, he believes, were predisposed to despotism, and the accounts of historians confirm the presence of despotic structures. Now, under tyranny subjects are reduced to the condition of animals: they know only submission. "It is very dangerous for a prince to have subjects who obey him blindly. If the Inca, Atahualpa, had not been obeyed by his people as if they were animals, they would have prevented 160 Spaniards

[1] For *Mes Pensées* the numbers between parentheses refer first, to the chronological classification of the Nagel edition (Paris, 1950-1955); second, preceded by "Bkn" to the systematic classification of Barkhausen, also used in the editions of *Pléiade* and *Intégrale*. For *l'Esprit des lois*, the Roman numeral indicates the book; the Arab numeral, the chapter.

from taking him. If he been less obeyed after he was imprisoned, Peruvian generals would have saved the empire (. . .) If Montezuma, a prisoner, had been respected only as a man, the Mexicans would have destroyed the Spaniards. And if Guatimozin (Cuauhtemoc), captured, had not with one word caused the end of the war, his capture would not have been the moment of the fall of the empire, and the Spaniards would have been afraid to irritate his subjects by his execution" (1983, Bkn. 648). The *a contrario* proof of this interdependence is that other peoples of America whose structures were not despotic resisted the Spanish for much longer.

However, this is only half the explanation. We find the other half in a long fragment (1265, Bkn. 614) that imagines a new outcome of the combat but one following modifications that are quite different from those suggested by Montaigne and so radical that the hypothesis of Montesquieu is only intended to show their impossibility. The change, he affirms, would be closely related to the introduction of rational philosophy: "If a Descartes had come to Mexico one hundred years before Cortés: if he had taught the Mexicans that men, such as they are made, cannot be immortal; if he had made them understand that all natural effects are the result of the laws and communications of movements; if he had made them realize in the effects of nature the impact of bodies rather than the invisible power of Spirits: Cortés, with a handful of men, would never have destroyed the vast empire of Mexico nor Pizzarro that of Peru".

If Cortés won, it is because he belonged to the same civilization that would produce Descartes: the relation between abstract philosophy and military art, far from being arbitrary, is necessary. The Indian emperors were defeated because of the superstition that dominated their representation of the world. "Montezuma, who could have exterminated the Spanish on their arrival, if he had had the courage, by using force, or who could even, with no risk, have starved them to death, only attacked them through sacrifices and prayers that he ordered in all the temples." In a word, "superstition deprived these empires of all the strength they would have been able to draw from their civilization."

Montesquieu thus sees the principal causes of the defeat

in the cultural characteristics of the Aztecs and Incas. The effect of surprise itself is not an absolute fact, inevitable in all regions: "When the Romans, for the first time, saw the elephants that were fighting against them, they were astonished, but they did not lose heart, as the Mexicans did at the sight of horses." Technical superiority is not decisive, and Montesquieu would not have subscribed to Montaigne's certainty that the muskets of the Spaniards would have been able "to trouble Caesar himself". "It is true that the Mexicans did not have fireams, but they had bows and arrows, which were the strongest weapons of the Greeks and Romans. They did not have iron, but they had flint that cut down and pierced like iron and that they used as tips for their arms." The superiority of the Spaniards is above all psychological: they "made use of the veneration or rather the interior cult that the people rendered the emperors of Mexico and Peru."

We could characterize Montesquieu's procedure, inversely from that of Montaigne, as an epistemological "globalism". Everything holds up: despotism, superstition and military defeat on the one hand, rationalism, the ability to adapt and victory on the other; a society is a coherent wholole, without incidental traits that can be "taken away" at will. At once the way to knowledge is open: it is indeed a description of Indian societies that Montesquieu proposes, even if it is summary and subject to improvement; we could not say the same for the use of the same material by Montaigne.

The counterpart of this globalism, in Montesquieu, is an axiological atomism. Contrarily to Montaigne, for whom the courage of the Ancients and that of the Indians was closely associated and still aroused admiration, Montesquieu demands, on one hand, that each action be judged in its context. The Spanish themselves, according to evidence, also gave proof of an exceptional courage, but he does not admire them because of that. "The account of the greatest marvels always leaves something dark and sad in the spirit. I like very much to see at Thermopylae, at Plataea and at Marathon, a few Greeks destroy the myriad armies of the Persians: these are the heroes who sacrifice themselves for their country, defend it against the usurpers. Here, they are brigands, led by avarice, for the satisfaction of which they burn and exterminate a large number of peaceful nations." (1268 Bkn. 617).

At the same time, though, Montesquieu refuses to make a global

judgment of Indian societies that would have concerned all their aspects, and he is content to deplore some of them, like despotism or superstition, and praise others, such as what seems to him religious tolerance. "When Montezuma insisted on saying that the Spanish religion was good for their country and that of Mexico for Mexico, he was not being absurd, because actually legislators could not help having regard for what nature had established before them", he writes in *L'Esprit des lois* (XXIV, 24), thus provoking the anger of his theologian censors. Therefore, he has no need to see in the Indians an incarnation of the Golden Age, which would have blinded his perception, nor, like Sepulveda, having observed a trait that he judged negative (such as despotism) to extend his judgment to all their other characteristics, moved by an impulse to unify and to approve the conquest. Montesquieu judges these characteristics one by one (while still taking their context into account), which permits him to be more perspicacious than Sepulveda and more generous to the other than Montaigne.

A certain religious relativism is praised in Montezuma; its absence, on the contrary, often serves as a basis for reproaches addressed to the Spaniards. The latter decided that the Indians deserved to be reduced to slavery because they ate grasshoppers, "they smoked tobacco, and they did not have a beard like the Spaniards;" but is not judging in this way renouncing the principles themselves of humanity (XV, 3)? The same refusal to adapt to the customs of the country is revealed by the execution of Atahualpa: "The height of stupidity was that they did not condemn him by the political and civil laws of his country but by the political and civil laws of their own" (XXVI, 22).

We can thus imagine that Montesquieu places himself in a purely relativist perspective and simply demands the right of each to be judged by his own laws and choose his own religion. But this is not the case, and it is clear that the condemnation of despotism could not be founded on the relativist creed. *De l'Esprit des lois* is a huge attempt to articulate the universal and the relative, rather than to choose one or the other: on one hand exists natural law and the forms of government which are correlated with it; on the other, the spirit of each nation, resulting from the interaction of geographical conditions, economic and cultural structures and history. For each individual judgment, those ingre-

dients must be kept in mind, and the part of the universal and that of the relative must be measured. Religious tolerance is welcome, just as is that concerning customs of food or dress, but despotism is an evil wherever it is found.

Montesquieu will be particularly clear on that point in an analysis of the behavior of the Spaniards, in which he refers to the writings of Las Casas and, leaving aside all relativist considerations, admits that he finds it impossible to "think without indignation of the cruelties the Spaniards practiced toward the Indians" (207, Bkn. 1573). If he pronounces this condemnation, it is not because the Greeks were better but because such acts are contrary to the natural and universal law, which he has taken care to express. Also, let no one object to him that extermination was the "only way to preserve [their conquests] and that, consequently, the Machiavellians would not call [it] cruel... The crime loses nothing of its atrocity because of the usefulness drawn from it. It is true that we always judge actions by their success, but this judgment of men is itself a deplorable abuse in Morals." The act cannot be judged with regard to its results but must be judged in relation to universal principles. The adage according to which "history proved them right" is indefensible: history is on the side of force, not of reason, and it is not because things *are* a certain way that we must admit that they *should* be that way. This concept of morality, which judged actions from their success or failure, is in itself profoundly immoral; Montesquieu takes a position diametrically opposed to that of Machiavelli.

The biological model of Montaigne, characterizing the history of humanity (infancy-development-decadence) is replaced here by a systematic view of different societies whose history is but one of the dimensions. Curiously, it is knowledge of them that authorizes the pronouncement of judgments—not on societies taken as totalities but on each of their aspects.

IV

These two positions on the conquest seem exemplary to us for more than one reason.

Montaigne departs (in other essays than *Des Coches*) from the

principle of a generalized tolerance: all customs and all manners are valid, and barbarism does not exist. We simply call barbarous what is not like us. However, this position of extreme relativism is untenable, and the descriptions of Montaigne are in fact penetrated here and there by value judgments. These values are not explicitly presented as universal (since the announced program is that of relativity), and we will not be surprised to find that their place is held by the preferences of the individual, Montaigne himself. In fact, his universalism is of the most ordinary sort, that is, ethnocentric (and egocentric). This exclusive interest in itself means that the others are there for argument or example, and their eventual evaluation rests on a misunderstanding: if they were not in reality as close to the Greeks as he claims? This idealization of the others has never really served their cause (even though it may testify to the good intentions of the author), because in the absence of any control coming from knowledge, it is easy to invert the indication of the example and from good, make it bad. Respect for the others begins with recognizing them as such, not with praise derived through inversion beginning with one's own portrait. The first violence is that they are reduced to being only a means of speaking for ourselves; later it does not matter if one says good or bad. We know today that it is not enough that the ideal of the colonizer be elevated for the result of colonization to be positive: that of Africa in the 19th century was, after all, made in a spirit worthy of Montaigne, in the name of the struggle against slavery.

The mixture of relativism and universalism that we find in Montesquieu is quite a different matter, since it explicitly admits the pertinence of the two and that its whole conscious effort (in *L'Esprit des lois*) consists in trying to find out how they are articulated. Radical relativism is an illusion, but we cannot because of that go back to a universalism that ignores the plurality of cultures and the egalitarian aspirations of individuals. This variety of universalism, which is found throughout Christian teaching, perished in the wreckage of religion, but we have seen what care Montesquieu took in distinguishing between tolerance in religious matters and natural, universal law. His epistemological globalism opened the way for him to the knowledge of others: a trait of their civilization does not find its meaning in a comparison with similar facts found in ours but in its relationship with other traits of the

same culture. At the same time, his axiological atomism allows him to refuse the sterile dichotomy of "everything is good—everything is bad", and leads him to differentiated value judgments, sometimes in the name of a criterion of local expediency, sometimes as a function of a universal morality.

My preference, as may have been guessed, is for this second position. Now, it is rather the one of Montaigne that has been imposed as an ideal during the centuries that separate us, while that of Montesquieu has remained marginal. Even today, the most widespread attitude is derived from that of Montaigne: an effective adhesion to the cause of the "oppressed", seconded by a misunderstanding of the facts in their regard and followed closely by a naive ethnocentrism. Why this "injustice"? I would be inclined to look for the reasons in that the attitude of Montaigne is perfectly in tune with the spirit of Western Europe of these recent centuries: it is the good conscience of the colonizer. Montesquieu's voice, on the contrary, could not be heard because it came too early, with its refusal of unifying principles, with its stubborn adherence to pluralism.

Perhaps things are beginning to change in our day? We are beginning to agree today in seeing in Montesquieu the pioneer of modern social sciences; and we know that knowledge is not only an end in itself but also, in itself, a moral attitude. Perhaps it was necessary to wait until the end of colonization (roughly speaking) to begin to perceive other civilizations at first as others: neither ideal, nor opposite. At the same time, this very recognition determines the ethical and political choices to be made: our own ideals may be shaken if we learn the truth about the others. Far from shutting ourselves up in an untenable relativism, the knowledge of others as such authorizes us to make judgments of them—and of ourselves.

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