Charles Montesquieu

Montesquieu: The Balanced Democrat

When Charles Montesquieu (1689–1755) was born, France was ruled by an absolute king, Louis XIV. Montesquieu was born into a noble family and educated in the law. He traveled extensively throughout Europe, including England, where he studied the Parliament. In 1722, he wrote a book, ridiculing the reign of Louis XIV and the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church.

Montesquieu published his greatest work, *The Spirit of the Laws*, in 1748. Unlike Hobbes and Locke, Montesquieu believed that in the state of nature individuals were so fearful that they avoided violence and war. The need for food, Montesquieu said, caused the timid humans to associate with others and seek to live in a society. "As soon as man enters into a state of society," Montesquieu wrote, "he loses the sense of his weakness, equality ceases, and then commences the state of war."

Montesquieu did not describe a social contract as such. But he said that the state of war among individuals and nations led to human laws and government.

Montesquieu wrote that the main purpose of government is to maintain law and order, political liberty, and the property of the individual. Montesquieu opposed the absolute monarchy of his home country and favored the English system as the best model of government.

Montesquieu somewhat misinterpreted how political power was actually exercised in England. When he wrote *The Spirit of the Laws*, power was concentrated pretty much in Parliament, the national legislature. Basing his ideas on separation of powers in the ancient Roman Republic, Montesquieu thought he saw a separation and balancing of the powers of government in England as well.

Montesquieu viewed the English king as exercising executive power balanced by the law-making Parliament, which was itself divided into the House of Lords and the House of Commons, each checking the other. Then, the executive and legislative branches were still further balanced by an independent court system.

Montesquieu concluded that the best form of government was one in which the legislative, executive, and judicial powers were separate and kept each other in check to prevent any branch from becoming too powerful. He believed that uniting these powers, as in the monarchy of Louis XIV, would lead to despotism. While Montesquieu's separation of powers theory did not accurately describe the government of England, Americans later adopted it as the foundation of the U.S. Constitution.