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Vickie B. Sullivan, *Montesquieu and the Despotic Ideas of Europe: An Interpretation of The Spirit of the Laws*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017. xi + 288 pp. Bibliography and index. \$50.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-2264-8291-0; \$50.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-0-2264-8307-8.

Review by Edward J. Kolla, Georgetown University, School of Foreign Service in Qatar.

Tufts political philosophy professor Vickie Sullivan, whose previous works have focused on a number of early-modern luminaries, has turned her attention to France and to Montesquieu.[1] Sullivan provides a close reading of Montesquieu's "masterwork," as she repeatedly calls *The Spirit of the Laws*, and advances the thesis that the despotism the Frenchman so reviled was, in his view, present in the history of European political thought with profound consequences for contemporary times.

Sullivan begins her work by explaining that Montesquieu aimed not to "remake" the world "but rather to document and to transmit its immense variety" (p. 1). In spite of this avowed objectivity, "no reader can miss" Montesquieu's "intense disdain" for despotism (p. 2). Despotism is variously defined. It is a "threat" to the "knowledge" that can provide "improvement" to societies (pp. 6-7); it can produce "tyrannical" actions such as the overthrow of republics (p. 7); it is "political slavery" (p. 179). It is explained by way of antitheticals: the "promotion of commerce," the "separation of powers," and a "humane approach to criminal judgements" are "not despotic ideas" (p. 15). Despotism also has a longevity that stretches from the time of Plato, if not before, to well after Montesquieu's day and includes the regimes of Robespierre, Franco, Mussolini, Hitler, and "the Ministry of State Security in East Germany" (p. 9).

Sullivan characterizes the display of both despotic practices and ideas that exist in Europe as *not* the "full and final lesson" that Montesquieu aimed for "his readers to grasp," but surely "a piece of it" (p. 205). She asserts that, through "critical engagement" with *The Spirit of the Laws*, "Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and aspects of Christianity" all are shown to have had despotic tendencies that became manifest in European politics and society (p. 14). At the outset, Sullivan asserts the "importance of thinkers and their ideas" (p. 11) and, moreover, that Montesquieu believed despotic "doctrines or ideas" are "the sources of despotic practices" (p. 14). She describes the novelty of her approach as emphasizing these "fundamental problems" as opposed to the Frenchman's "positive teachings" (p. 14), although she aims to connect the latter "well-known and important themes" to "Montesquieu's critique of Europe's despotic ideas" (p. 15).

She begins this endeavor by examining the treatment of two other eminent early-modern political philosophers, Machiavelli and Hobbes, in *The Spirit of the Laws*. Perhaps not surprisingly, Montesquieu and the Florentine are shown to have many divergent opinions. For example, Montesquieu believes in leniency in punishments and “finds that Machiavelli’s treatment of judgments and accusations is too harsh and thus too despotic” (p. 33); Machiavelli prefers regimes in which leaders enjoy “unalloyed power” whereas Montesquieu endorses ones, as in contemporary England, where citizens enjoy “security and liberty” (p. 41). Also predictably, Montesquieu’s “opposition to the thought of Thomas Hobbes” is clear in this work (p. 50). The Frenchman rejects a political system led by “an all-powerful prince” and the presupposition of fear that, both in the theoretical state of nature and in actual “threats of despotism,” underpins it (p. 53).

Sullivan is at her finest when conducting close readings of texts, and the chapters on Machiavelli and Hobbes are particularly strong. She devotes fully a third of her book on Montesquieu to his engagement with two authors whom he only mentions five times in all—Machiavelli “three times in the entirety of the final version of the body of the work” (p. 26) and Hobbes merely “twice” (p. 50). She masterfully shows that Montesquieu’s “attention to [the] thought and influence” of both philosophers “is much more extensive than these few explicit appeals to their names would suggest and than scholars note” and, indeed, that the Frenchman “engages extensively with their ideas even when he does not name them” (p. 19).

If Sullivan’s work is strongest in terms of close textual analysis, one slightly weaker dimension is historical contextualization (this comment no doubt reflects an obvious disciplinary bias, coming from a historian). When she describes Montesquieu’s opposition to Machiavelli’s love of “great acts of authority” (p. 27) and “force” in politics (p. 28), she outlines the manifestation of such “great *coup d’états*” in French royal life, most infamously in the 1574 Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre (p. 29). She makes some quite categorical claims about this most contentious and complex event, and although nodding to the fact that “[h]istorians have long debated where ultimate responsibility lies for the mass violence” (p. 29), her notes do not include anywhere near a comprehensive or recent survey of the literature.[2]

Proceeding in reverse-chronological order, Sullivan next looks at Montesquieu’s interpretation of how early Christianity impacted politics in Europe, finding that although it “tamed the ferocity of the ancients,” the church inculcated despotism and “continues to perpetrate the most flagrant atrocities” (p. 83). In terms of positives, Christian ideas helped “eradicate slavery in Europe,” (more about this in a moment), render wars “gentler,” and “curb the bloodthirstiness” of princes (p. 85). On the negative side, the church became a conduit for despotism not least because of the incorporation of its teachings with, and their transmission via, Roman law (pp. 113-22). Both she and her subject of study lavish attention on the horrors of the inquisitions in Spain and Portugal (pp. 91-95, 99-102) in ways that are often reminiscent of the so-called “Black Legend,” a connection Sullivan does not address even though Montesquieu’s analysis can be and has been interpreted in this regard.

In the third and final section, Sullivan returns to individuals and discusses the two great ancient thinkers, Plato and Aristotle, both of whom Montesquieu characterizes as “philosophical legislators” (p. 135). She posits a “more thoroughgoing and concerted attack on Plato” by Montesquieu than other analysts, because of Plato’s harsh position on slavery, the “militaristic character” of his republic, and the “inhumane” and even “despotic” nature of his

legislation (pp. 140-41). With respect to Aristotle, he and Montesquieu share many “important commonalities,” but ultimately the Frenchman opposes his position on the important topic, again, of slavery (pp. 169-70, 179-88).

Overall, Sullivan succeeds in showing how Montesquieu believed these various sources inspired despotic ideas and instilled despotic practices in Europe—and, indeed, this is her principle thesis. However, in the introduction she takes this claim a step further. She notes that “Montesquieu is famous for overtly associating despotism with Asia and the Middle East... A contemporary scholar on this basis might be inclined to term Montesquieu an Orientalist” (p. 2). But Sullivan rejects this designation and claims that “Montesquieu’s attention to the various manifestations of European despotism certainly undermines the characterization of Montesquieu as an Orientalist” (p. 10).

But why? Sullivan quotes a lone passage from a private notebook, not *The Spirit of the Laws*, in which Montesquieu states, “Mohammedanism and Christianity, made solely for the afterlife, are annihilating [the positive legacies of classical civilization],” and she thereby asserts that he “links the East and the West together on the very basis of their mutual susceptibility to despotism,” viewing them “as unified” (p. 10). However, this is only one and, I would argue, a rather tenuous unification. The remainder of the evidence for this equivalence seems to be the mere fact that Montesquieu identified despotism in Europe, which Sullivan ably shows throughout her book. But that fact is not in itself proof of an equality of treatment between despotism, East and West, by Montesquieu, such as to mitigate claims of his Orientalism. On the contrary, many instances exist in Sullivan’s book that reaffirm the notion that Montesquieu believed in European superiority over the East (pp. 54, 65, 81, 94, 124, 169-70).

The clearest example of European superiority or, perhaps better phrased, of apologia for European atrocity, is where Montesquieu argues that Christianity, by advancing the proposition of “fundamental equality of all human beings,” is “the agent” for the eradication of slavery in Europe (p. 86). Sullivan highlights that Montesquieu’s “specification ‘in Europe’” is important, since he was aware that “European nations enslave non-European peoples,” but she does not investigate further than to say that this reflects a “perversion of Christianity’s teachings” revealed through a “facetious declaration” by Montesquieu (pp. 86-87). I would have loved Sullivan to develop the contradiction here in Montesquieu’s thought, and in other sections where she discusses slavery (pp. 171, 209). Many thinkers, notably in the classical republican tradition, recognize the danger of a disjuncture between a power’s behaviors at home and abroad in an imperial setting, as a threat to liberty writ large.

How Montesquieu grappled with this colonial conundrum, just like a fairer assessment of the thinker’s comparative interpretation of despotism in East and West rather than a simple rejection of his Orientalism, would have improved what is already a fine book clearly showing that the Frenchman believed despotism in Europe to be an important, pronounced, and timely threat.

## NOTES

[1] See for example, most recently, Sullivan’s *Machiavelli, Hobbes, and the Formation of a Liberal Republicanism in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

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[2] To give but one example, they lack the important works of Barbara B. Diefendorf, such as *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

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