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Trevor Shelley, *Globalization and Liberalism: Montesquieu, Tocqueville and Manent*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020. x + 289 pp. \$60.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780268107291; \$47.99 (eb). ISBN 9780268107314.

Review by Blake Smith, University of Chicago.

Trevor Shelley's new book *Globalization and Liberalism: Montesquieu, Tocqueville and Manent* is a work of political theory that uses the writings of three French thinkers to investigate the possibility of a defense of the nation as a political unit from within the horizon of liberal democratic thought. Indeed, *Globalization and Liberalism* is as much a political act as it is a philosophical investigation. It stakes claims not only within the field of political theory, but within contemporary politics, in dialogue chiefly with conservative interlocutors such as Patrick Deneen, Yoram Hazony, Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin. It is addressed to political theorists, and to a broader public, rather than to scholars specializing in French intellectual and political history. However, Shelley's interpretations of the work of Montesquieu, Tocqueville and Pierre Manent—and the apologia for a certain form of nationalism that these interpretations serve—offer a number of points for possible dialogue, and thus a reminder that the fields of history and political theory, although not always in the closest communication, have much to say to each other. Before examining the moments in *Globalization and Liberalism* that might incite interdisciplinary reflection, this review will outline Shelley's political-theoretical argument and political agenda.

However cosmopolitan we may be in our outlook, or however narrowly self-interested, almost all of us live at least some portion of our lives thinking and acting within the political horizon of the nation—a space larger than the circuit of the private sphere and smaller than that of universal humanity. We may not speak explicitly, as politicians do, of “fellow Americans” or *concitoyens*, but we inevitably find ourselves appealing in political discussions with friends, family, neighbors and colleagues to ideas about shared national values, interests and identities. Such-and-such a policy, we try to convince them, is a stain on “our” national reputation, or fails to live up to “who we are”—or more despairingly, we might say that some political event has revealed a terrible truth about “us” and our collective failure. In this sense, we are nearly all on some occasion *strategic nationalists*, that is, people who appeal to something called “the nation” in order to bring about some action in common with others.

Shelley argues that such acts of performative, everyday nationalism are at odds with the dominant strand of Western liberal democratic thought. This intellectual tradition, he claims, orients our thinking towards the relationship between the rights-bearing individual and

humanity in general. It thinks of rights as universal, shared by all human beings because they are human beings, and as permitting individuals to pursue their own projects in accordance with their values. The nation, as a site of political thinking and action that lies between the “the plane of the singular individual” and “the level of the bulk of humanity” (p. 1), is difficult for this tradition to comprehend. Indeed, those whose thinking is informed by the latter tend to regard the nation as an awkward transitional form that is destined to be overcome through the progress of history, which tends to the ever-greater freedom of the rights-bearing individual in an ever-larger space of cosmopolitan humanity. Liberals imagine that globalization, the process by which economic and cultural exchange connects individuals throughout the world, will permit the emergence of a post-national political space adequate to the universality of their political thinking. In the meantime, in anticipation of this “end of history,” “[w]e attend altogether to our particular selves as we stretch our attention widely to the species in general, as all the while a sense of unity beckons.”

There are at least two problems with this bifurcation of attention in liberal democratic political theory and practice towards the particularity of the individual and the generality of an abstract concept of humanity, and thus away from the middle term of the nation. The first, as I have suggested, is that, however regrettable and historically contingent the fact may be, we do live at least some part of our lives as members of a nation—and not merely in the sense of passively accepting certain rights and obligations as citizens of France, the United States, etc. (this would be a question of membership in a *state*, a concrete entity with soldiers and bureaucrats, rather than in a *nation*, an imaginary object), but in the active sense of appealing to shared fantasies about this nation in our political speech. To be unable to think the nation properly is to miss something important about who we are as political agents—which would be all the more unfortunate insofar as we might want, in fact, to overcome the nation in practical terms, rather than simply ignoring it in theory.

The second problem, which more strongly animates Shelley, is that we—or at any rate many people in our world—might want to hold onto “the integrity of distinct communities” (p. 9) and “the perspective of shared life with a particular community” such as the nation provides. If political theory grounded in the tradition of liberal democratic thinking cannot account for and accommodate such desires, Shelley suggests, there is a risk that in the absence of a “moderate liberal alternative,” “only radical, reactionary and particularistic voices of dissent” will speak for—and win the support of—those who wish to continue to live in nations (p. 11). A “moderate liberal alternative” would reconcile these three figures of our political imagination—the individual, the nation, and humanity—and would reconcile our particular historical situation in which the nation still operates as a space of political action to the ongoing process of globalization, which may (but also, Shelley stresses, may *not*) render the nation and national states obsolete.

Shelley aims to provide such an alternative in *Globalization and Liberalism*. Readers may doubt whether this is in fact a “moderate” project, rather than a conservative one. Those with such suspicions are unlikely to be assuaged by Shelley’s argument that the United States is uniquely equipped among the Western liberal democracies to “resist the universalizing logic as advocated by transnational progressives and others who would bring about greater formlessness for the sake of immersion in an emergent unified humanity” (p. 17). Thinking the nation in a “moderate” vein, it appears, will help us not only understand but indeed appreciate the United States’ relative distance from the structures and projects that have provided a (however paltry) minimum of international law and governance since 1945. Of the Trump administration, Shelley claims “it

has been convincingly argued that the essence of his administration is a form of ‘nationalism,’ which squarely places ‘America First,’ and in this regard has been widely supported by a majority of Americans”—in contrast to “elite opinion” (p. 182).<sup>[1]</sup> In this sense, it appears that Shelley is animated not merely by a desire to think the nation properly in a globalizing world, but by a desire to preserve the nation as a framework of political action against both the economic forces and the political desires that operate against it.

*Globalization and Liberalism* offers good news and bad news for liberal democrats concerned about the recent resurgence of nationalism in the United States and elsewhere. On the one hand, Shelley says to liberal democrats that the horizons of their intellectual traditions offer resources for thinking the nation (and thinking the everyday practices of “nationalism” in which we participate) in “moderate” fashion, without giving way to the violent, xenophobic, and illiberal aspects of nationalism, in the specific sense of the latter as an ideology that privileges the nation over the claims of individuals and common humanity. On the other hand, Shelley tells liberals that the Trump presidency falls squarely within this “moderate” sort of nationalism, and thus within the liberal intellectual tradition.

Such appear to be the political aims and stakes of Shelley’s project. Regardless of whether or not one is convinced by his characterization of Trump, or sympathetic to his hopes for securing America’s continued status as an “exceptional nation” capable of resisting “the transpolitical and transnational aspirations that other Western peoples and leaders embrace,” Shelley is surely right to bring into view the importance of the problem of the nation for liberal democratic theory (p. 183). In order to demonstrate that the liberal tradition possesses the intellectual resources necessary for offering a “moderate alternative” to aspirations for a post-national cosmopolitan order, Shelley draws on three French thinkers: Montesquieu, Tocqueville and Pierre Manent.

Montesquieu and Tocqueville are familiar to scholars working on France—and indeed to most undergraduates—while Manent, although increasingly well-known in the English-speaking world, has not yet attained this canonical status. What connects these thinkers is not perhaps immediately obvious. Shelley argues that through the work of all three runs the “problem” of the “tension” between the particularity of individuals and the universality of humanity, a tension to be mediated through “particular political communities.” “All three thinkers,” Shelley claims, “understand that actualizing universal humanity” is only possible within “particular concretizations,” an understanding that necessarily “suggests the importance of limits to the grandest visions or aspirations of globalization” (p. 12). This is to say, in the more limited version of the argument, that all three thinkers insist, in different ways, on the importance of the nation as a specific space within which liberal democratic ideals about individual and human rights can be made politically actionable. In a stronger version of the argument, Shelley sometimes finds that these thinkers give us reasons to find the nation not only an indispensable framework for political action (and so for thinking) in the current historical moment, but as intrinsically preferable to a more cosmopolitan framework that would englobe humanity as a whole.

In bringing together Montesquieu, Tocqueville and Manent, Shelley is to some extent following Manent’s own lead, building on the interpretation of Montesquieu that Manent developed in such works as *La Cité de l’Homme* (1994) and of Tocqueville in *Tocqueville et la nature de la démocratie* (1982).<sup>[2]</sup> Indeed, the conception of liberalism that underwrites *Globalization and Liberalism* is deeply Manentian. Like Manent, Shelley constructs an account of the liberal intellectual tradition that many self-described liberals might not recognize, and from which a number of significant

liberal thinkers and concepts are absent. He asserts, for example, that “it is well known that liberalism is born in and through a thought experiment: the state of nature” (p. 6). Arguments about the state of nature, as present in the work of Hobbes and Rousseau, are for Shelley the “primary intellectual instrument” of the liberal tradition. This fact was not, however, “well known” to such thinkers as Emile Durkheim, whose defense of individualism and humanism rested in part on a repudiation of the concepts of the state of nature and originary contract in the work of Hobbes and Rousseau.[3]

It is perhaps not coincidental that Durkheim, and a larger intellectual tradition of French republicanism in which he participated, also attempted—although in a manner different from that of Shelley—to articulate a defense for a certain understanding of the nation as a horizon for political action within which individual rights and aspirations towards a cosmopolitan humanity could both find their place. Neither this tradition, nor the broad political and intellectual context of modern French history that has been the matrix of Montesquieu’s, Tocqueville’s and Manent’s thought, appears in *Globalization and Liberalism*.

The relative autonomy of Shelley’s analysis from the French historical context goes hand-in-hand with a dismissal of the work of historians of France. Lynn Hunt’s *Inventing Human Rights: a History* (2007) appears to Shelley as emblematic of the dangers of “an understanding of rights that is unconditional and either incoherently accounted for ontologically or altogether disconnected from political reality, so that the extension of rights becomes endless in scope and number.”[4] Shelley suggests that where rights are not understood as connected to the political space of the nation, and are seen instead to arise from the human nature inherent in each individual, they lack a “properly rational basis” and create political disorder (p. 212). This engagement with Hunt is self-defeating in its lack of charity. Hunt’s argument in *Inventing Human Rights*, which builds on the anthropological and sociological commitments of her earlier work, is that emotional bonds among individuals, sustained by cultural practices such as reading fiction, gave rise to a sense of sacredness adhering to the human person. This follows her account of the French Revolution as a symbolically mediated and affect-laden “family romance,” and extends Durkheim’s account (in *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*) of the affective circuits of public life in the French republic that generate inter-connected and mutually reinforcing investments in the individual, the nation, and humanity.[5]

Regardless of whether or not one wholly accepts her historical account of the emergence of human rights as an actionable concept in modern history, Hunt provides conceptual tools for thinking through precisely the problem that interests Shelley: how the concepts of rights-bearing individuals and universal humanity can become, and perhaps *only* become, operational within a community knit together by bonds of culture, affect and action. The potential utility of the missed opportunity for dialogue across interdisciplinary lines is apparent on the following page, in which, having just castigated Hunt for her irrational account of the origin of rights, Shelley criticizes Hobbes, whose “abstract rationalism inevitably undermines or neglects practical or lived human and political experience” (p. 213). Hunt turns our attention to just the sort of practices—material and cognitive—by which lived experience becomes interpersonal and political. If one is looking for means of going beyond the abstract, disembodied character of liberal political theory, her work is a good place to start.

This non-conversation with Hunt—and more generally with the historiography and history of France—is a problem of interdisciplinary communication, not a failing particular to *Globalization*

*and Liberalism*. Shelley makes a stimulating and important intervention in the ongoing debate about the future of the nation and nationalism, and provides a basis for considering how a certain understanding of the liberal intellectual tradition can accommodate a “moderate alternative” to both the most reactionary forms of nationalism and the post-national ideals of cosmopolitan universalists. His reading of Montesquieu, in particular, is a useful addition to the recent historiography that attends to the ambivalences about global trade in eighteenth-century French political economy.[6] Likewise, Shelley provides a lucid and sympathetic account of Manent’s intellectual orientations and projects, which should be of interest to readers looking for a point of entry into the work of a thinker increasingly recognized as one of the most salient of our era. Whatever readers make of Shelley’s nationalist alternative, or alternative nationalism, *Globalization and Liberalism* is sure to provoke thought and debate not only over the legitimacy of the nation as a political space, but over the meaning, history and trajectory of liberalism.

## NOTES

[1] Shelley here cites Christopher Demuth, “Trumpism, Nationalism, and Conservatism,” *Claremont Review of Books*, 19, no. 1 (Winter 2019), 32-41.

[2] Pierre Manent, *La Cité de l’homme* (Paris: Fayard, 1994); in English as *The City of Man*, trans. Marc A. LePain (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville et la nature de la démocratie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982); In English as *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, trans. John Waggoner (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996). Céline Spector traces Manent’s reading of Montesquieu back to his chief intellectual influence, Leo Strauss, in “Montesquieu et la crise du droit naturel moderne. L’exégèse straussienne,” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 2013, 77 (1), pp.65-78. The same might be done for Manent’s reading of Tocqueville and of liberal democracy more generally.

[3] Emile Durkheim, *Hobbes à l’agrégation: un cours d’Emile Durkheim suivi par Marcel Mauss*, ed. Jean-François Bert, (Paris: Editions de l’École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2011); Emile Durkheim, *Le Contrat social de Rousseau*, ed. Pierre Hayat (Paris: Kimé, 2008).

[4] Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: Norton, 2007).

[5] Lynn Hunt “The Sacred and the French Revolution,” in *Durkheimian Sociology: Cultural Studies*, ed. Jeffrey Alexander (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 25-43; *Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1992).

[6] John Shovlin, “Emulation in Eighteenth-Century French Economic Thought,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, v. 36, 2 (Winter 2003), 224-330; *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism and the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2006). Paul Cheney, *Revolutionary Commerce: Globalization and the French Monarchy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). Anoush Terjanian, *Commerce and Its Discontents in Eighteenth-Century French Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

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