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D'Argenson, *Considérations sur le gouvernement: a critical edition, with other political texts*. Edited and introduced by Andrew Jainchill. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019. xii + 291 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. £65.00 (pb). ISBN 9781786942272.

Review by Joël Félix, University of Reading.

This volume of the Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment is the first modern edition of the *Considérations sur le gouvernement* by the marquis d'Argenson, a text published posthumously in 1764 and re-edited with corrections in 1784. This critical edition (pp. 73-225), with variants from the six manuscript versions, is preceded by an introduction (pp. 1-65) and followed by five "other political texts" (pp. 227-69).

A son of Louis XIV's famous lieutenant de police de Paris, the marquis d'Argenson (1694-1757) is best known to historians for his *Journal*, a well of anecdotes and reflections on court and politics in the 1740s and 1750s. As the editor makes it plain, however, if d'Argenson remains an important historical figure, this is less, perhaps, for his brief tenure as secrétaire d'Etat des Affaires Etrangères (1744-1747), and even his role as a diarist, and more for his political ideas on the institutions of the French monarchy. D'Argenson's intellectual trajectory epitomizes the doubts that arose--and divided the elites--about the French government in the latter part of Louis XIV's reign, an inglorious period marked by 25 years of warfare, hardship at home, and military defeats. While marquis d'Argenson's writings feed upon the crisis of the absolute monarchy, his work is best understood as a response to the failed experiences of the Regency (1715-1723), with the collapse of John Law's System looming in the background.[1]

D'Argenson can reasonably be considered as one of the inventors of the modern concept of *politique*. In reaction to Louis XIV's *politique*, concerned with the projection of his personal glory through foreign policy (and warfare), D'Argenson acclimatised the concept of *politique* as the management of domestic affairs for the benefit of the people and, more crucially, by the people. In this respect the title *Considérations sur le gouvernement* is slightly misleading. Jainchill's edition reminds us that d'Argenson's purpose was to discuss the question *Jusqu'où la démocratie peut-être admise dans le gouvernement monarchique*. To this effect d'Argenson developed a historical and critical analysis of the three types of government, the aristocracy, the republic, and the monarchy in France and in Europe. The trigger for this research was a willingness to refute Boulainvilliers's *thèse féodale*. But the work owed a lot to the influence of abbé de Saint-Pierre and the discussions in the Club de l'Entresol (1724-1731).[2] D'Argenson's reflections were completed in 1737, a decade before Montesquieu's *Esprit des Loix*.

Reading what d'Argenson had to say about the relationship between the monarchy and the aristocracy/nobility and their evolution is quite interesting in the light of the studies devoted to the second order since revisionism refashioned the interpretation of absolutism. Yet, what is more fascinating about d'Argenson remains his proposition to moderate the power of the king—and its potential excesses, notably the effect of ministerial despotism and the power of the court—by the introduction of elections to designate municipal officers, in lieu of office holders, to represent local interests. The project of combining (and balancing) monarchy and democracy is the major contribution of marquis d'Argenson to the history of political ideas. If the argument is presented clearly throughout the *Considérations*, the demonstration is worth the read for anyone who is interested in the history of the Old Regime and the French Revolution: for d'Argenson engages with a variety of concepts which are at the heart of modern politics, namely representation, opinion, scrutiny, among others. If some wish to argue that the French Revolution had no tradition of political representation, d'Argenson's *Considérations* reminds us that this was not true in the realm of ideas.

But what about the impact of d'Argenson's work before 1789? Here Jainchill's introduction and insights fall a bit short. The reader will learn that d'Argenson's manuscript circulated among a few philosophers, especially Rousseau, who paid tribute to the marquis in the *Contrat Social*. We remain in the realm of the High Enlightenment, of an intellectual history somehow detached from historical experience. This is surprising as d'Argenson's political ideas were essentially meant as pragmatic solutions to current societal issues, such as inequality before taxation, the infamous *corvée*, wealth creation, peace, and happiness. This said, Jainchill's editorial work is quite useful. While the variants of the manuscripts do not alter d'Argenson's central argument, some are quite significant in showing how the *Considérations*, composed in the 1720s and 1730s, were adapted to the challenges of the 1740s and 1750s. The new context was dominated by the publication of Montesquieu's *Esprit des Lois* (1748), Machault d'Arnouville's fiscal reforms (1749) and their impact on domestic politics.

In a recent article, Peter Balázs has analysed the tensions between Montesquieu and d'Argenson, the latter positing the republican values of virtue, frugality, and equality as an antidote to the ill effects of the principles of honour, aristocracy, and luxury, associated with monarchy by the former.^[3] While one might infer from such a reading that d'Argenson was an enemy of the parlements, the variants identified by Jainchill in the successive manuscripts of the *Considérations* evidence a rising sympathy for the magistrates of the Paris Parlement, and the rationale for their opposition to government in the 1750s. Such discernment fits well with historical developments after d'Argenson's death and the posthumous publication of the *Considérations* by Rey in 1764. Indeed, as peace resumed in 1763, Louis XV appointed L'Averdy, a magistrate of the Paris Parlement, to the post of *contrôleur général des finances* (1763-1768). Alongside the freedom of grain trade, L'Averdy is best known for his *réforme des municipalités* which introduced the principle of election at local level across large parts of the kingdom, until abbé Terray restored venality in 1770.^[4] Arguably, there is much more to d'Argenson's *Considérations* than the words of a text which paves the way to Mirabeau's *Mémoire concernant l'utilité des états provinciaux* (1757), Turgot's unpublished *Mémoire sur les municipalités*, or Necker's introduction of *assemblées provinciales* under Louis XVI.

There is also more to d'Argenson than his *Considérations*. The new edition includes three shorter texts. Two are concerned with peace (n.d.) and taxation (1731), themes familiar to abbé de Saint-Pierre. In the third one, d'Argenson joins in the short but intense debate caused by the publication

of Jean-Baptiste Melon's *Essai Politique sur le Commerce* (1734) in support of John Law and his *Système*. Here again, Jainchill's edition is useful in showing that the recent literature wrongly presented d'Argenson as a supporter of modern credit by attributing him an anonymous memorandum kept in the Bibliothèque universitaire de Poitiers.[5] One regrets, however, that the *Six lettres sur les finances* (included in one of the manuscripts of the *Considérations*) are not mentioned.[6] The useful addition of d'Argenson's comments on Melon, with its rejection of *crédit* and *circulation*, presents him very much as a proto-physiocrat and one of the fathers of political economy.[7]

The volume finishes with two observations from abbé de Saint-Pierre on d'Argenson's *Mémoire contre les abus de la taille* and the *Considérations*. These should be read with d'Argenson's appreciation of Saint-Pierre, a man he regarded as his mentor but also criticized for the rough style and impracticable ideas.[8] Saint-Pierre had criticisms for his pupil too: d'Argenson's attack on feudalism was pointless; his condemnation of venality was more eloquent than conclusive in the absence of a real cost analysis modelled on Petty's political arithmetic; his concept of democracy was unnerving and self-damaging; and the idea of election as the tool for solving fiscal inequalities was deemed incompatible with the necessary coercive nature of the state. In short, as Calonne would tell the Notables in 1787, Saint-Pierre warned that the right of agreeing to taxes was not the right of refusing taxes.

This interesting new critical edition of the *Considérations* concludes that the marquis remained a supporter of the *thèse royale*. This is probably correct. Yet, *mutatis mutandis*, d'Argenson ideas on democracy—and the reform of the monarchy—made an original and distinctive contribution to the fabrication of a new polity.

The other political texts:

By d'Argenson:

pp. 227-35. *Essai de l'exercice du tribunal européen par la France pour la pacification universelle. Appliqué au temps courant.*

pp. 237-46. *Mémoire contre les abus de la taille arbitraire, présenté au cardinal de Fleury, en décembre 1731.*

pp. 247-59. *Lettre sur le livre de l'Essai politique.*

By Saint-Pierre:

pp. 261-66. *Observations sur l'ouvrage politique manuscrit de M.*

pp. 267-69. *Observations de l'abbé de Saint-Pierre sur le précédent mémoire [contre les abus de la taille]*

NOTES

[1] At least according to the recent reading of Alexandre Dupilet, *La Régence absolue: Philippe d'Orléans et la polysynodie (1715-1718)* (Paris: Editions Champ Vallon, 2013).

[2] 'Pensées sur la réformation de l'Etat. Premières idées du traité de la démocratie. L'Abbé de Saint-Pierre, mon maître, que je regarde comme un grand génie en politique, m'a conseillé d'écrire ce discours', *Mémoires et journal inédit du marquis d'Argenson, ministre des affaires étrangères sous Louis XV*. Tome V (1857), publiés et annotés par M. le marquis d'Argenson, p. 259. Nick Childs, *A political academy in Paris, 1724-1731: the Entresol and his members* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2000).

[3] Peter Balázs, 'La monarchie républicaine du Marquis d'Argenson', *Studi Francesi. Rivista quadrimestrale fondata da Franco Simone*, 159 (2009): 506-518.

[4] Maurice Bordes. *La réforme municipale du contrôleur général Laverdy et son application (1764-1771)* (Association des publications de la Faculté des lettres et sciences humaines de Toulouse, 1968). Joël Félix, *Finances et politique au siècle des Lumières: Le ministère L'Averdy, 1763-1768* (Paris: Comité pour l'Histoire économique et financière, 1999).

[5] Most of the marquis d'Argenson's papers were destroyed in the 19th century but copies of his works are held in various repositories. Jainchill's observation relates to Michael Sonenscher's analysis of d'Argenson on credit in *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

[6] Archives des Affaires Etrangères, Mémoires et Documents France, 502. *Oeuvres mêlées de Mr le marquis d'Argenson*. The *Six lettres*, which look very much as d'Argenson's work, were 1. Lettre sur la capitale et l'étendue des provinces; 2. Sur les bleds; 3. Sur la cavalerie; 4. Les tailles; 5. Les fermes générales et sousfermes; 6. Le commerce.

[7] Alem, André. *Le marquis d'Argenson et l'économie politique au début du XVIIIe siècle: Pratiques mercantiles et théories libérales* (Paris: A. Rousseau, 1900).

[8] For a new reading of Saint-Pierre see the on-line edition of his *Ouvrages* and introductions by specialists, a collaborative work coordinated by Carole Dornier and accessible at <https://www.unicaen.fr/puc/sources/castel/accueil>

Joël Félix
University of Reading
j.m.felix@reading.ac.uk

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