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David W. Carrithers and Patrick Coleman, Eds., *Montesquieu and the Spirit of Modernity*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2002. Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, 2002: 9. ix + 257 pp. Index. \$74.00 (pb). ISBN 0-7294-0796-9.

Review by Johnson Kent Wright, Arizona State University.

It is a strange fact that Montesquieu has attracted as little scholarly attention as he has over the years. By comparison with the mountains of writing devoted to Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau—the only comparable early-modern political thinkers of such magnitude—the literature on the author of the *Lettres persanes* and *De l'esprit des lois* remains surprisingly modest in size, in both French and English. The explanation for this relative neglect is not at all clear. But it is not for lack of trying on the part of a few intrepid exceptions to the rule, chief among whom in the United States is David W. Carrithers. The author of a number of important articles on Montesquieu, Carrithers has in recent years also co-edited two different volumes of essays on him. *Montesquieu's Science of Politics* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2001, co-edited with Michael Mosher and Paul Rahe) devoted a small number of lengthy essays to *De l'esprit des lois*, covering its central topics. *Montesquieu and the Spirit of Modernity*, edited with Patrick Coleman, is a very different collection. Here essays varying from six to forty pages extend across the whole of Montesquieu's oeuvre, in order to address a single, lofty theme—Montesquieu's "modernity," or otherwise. Not surprisingly, the result is an uneven collection, with some hits and some misses, but one whose charming waywardness manages to capture a good deal about its object.

Carrithers presents the rationale for the volume in an extended introductory essay. The "spirit of modernity" in question is evidently that defined by Leo Strauss—the revolt against both classical and Christian teleology unleashed by the great succession of modern political philosophers, from Machiavelli to Hobbes, Locke, and beyond. What side did Montesquieu take in the epochal *querelle des anciens et modernes*? Strauss himself was in no doubt about the fundamental modernity of Montesquieu's outlook: "*The Spirit of the Laws* reads as if it were nothing but the document of an incessant fight, an unresolved conflict, between two social and political ideals: the Roman republic, whose principle is virtue, and England, whose principle is liberty. But in fact Montesquieu decides eventually in favor of England."^[1] All the same, the essays in *Montesquieu and the Spirit of Modernity* suggest that the signs of struggle or conflict in his writing detected by Strauss were not entirely illusory. Montesquieu was no doubt one of the founding fathers of modern constitutional liberalism: but his precise attitude toward England, and its devotion to "commerce" as a way of life, is a notorious crux, the object of sharp disagreement among scholars.^[2] Similarly, Montesquieu's new "science" of politics may have paved the way for the value-pluralism of modern social science; yet many observers, reading between the lines of *De l'esprit des lois*, have sensed a good deal of nostalgia for the grandeur and glory of classical antiquity.^[3] In the end, Carrithers recommends the prudent middle ground in this regard:

...Montesquieu's willingness to abandon the classical idea of a summum bonum conceived as a universalized, teleological goal for all mankind, combined with his high regard for the modern prioritization of liberty and his positive evaluation of the potential for commerce to improve the human condition, contributed to making him a partisan of those he termed "les modernes" . . . Nonetheless, we may best sum up his outlook by labeling him a modern with certain reservations, a . . . modern who was keenly aware that certain aspects of antiquity were more appealing than certain trends in modernity (p. 21).

After an all-too-brief consideration of comedy in Montesquieu's writing by Stephen Werner--the only discussion of the *Lettres persanes* in the volume, alas--the essays in *Montesquieu and the Spirit of Modernity* are divided into three clusters. The first tackles the "ancient-modern" divide directly. Catherine Volphilac-Auger, author of a splendid study of Montesquieu and Tacitus [4], starts the ball rolling with an analysis of Montesquieu's treatment of the figure of Alexander, which altered dramatically between the *Considérations sur les Romains* and *De l'esprit des lois*. Compared unfavorably to Rome in the former, Alexandrine imperialism was celebrated in the latter for the way in which it permitted both economic and cultural "commerce" to break down the barriers between East and West. In this instance, Volphilac-Auger concludes, any simple contrast between antiquity and modernity, or simple-minded notion of historical "progress," were short-circuited--Alexander, for Montesquieu, was a peculiarly modern imperialist. In his essay on "The Political Economy of Republicanism," on the other hand, James W. Muller re-emphasizes the contrast with a vengeance, providing what is in effect an extended brief on behalf of Strauss's judgment about Montesquieu's choice of English liberty over Roman virtue. For Muller, Montesquieu promoted a thoroughly modern species of "economic" humanism: "[W]hat is worth most to human beings, in his view, is the tranquility of spirit that arises when each one is confident that he is secure. Montesquieu calls that security liberty, and he finds it consistent with the idea that everything has a price or a value. What matters to him is that the price or value of a human being should not be a small one" (p. 75). As her title "The Regime and Montesquieu's Principles of Education" suggests, Diana J. Schaub's account of education (or "soul-formation") in *De l'esprit des lois* also makes a more or less orthodox Straussian case. Her demonstration of Montesquieu's preference for modern, as opposed to ancient republicanism--or early-modern monarchy--concludes with pedagogical advice for American republicans (and perhaps Republicans as well): "Do we now require a 'Book of Virtues' other than our constitutional charters? . . . I suspect Montesquieu would advise us to look to the health of the institutions of limited government--to recall our own principles--rather than attempt to reinstate ancient principles" (p. 100). Elena Russo, finally, concludes the first part of the book with a superbly fine-grained analysis of Montesquieu's understanding of ancient "virtue." For all his anti-heroic bent, Russo argues, Montesquieu made a major contribution to the modern "myth" of Roman virtue, in the line that ran through Benjamin Constant to its climax in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche.

The four essays in the second part of *Montesquieu and the Spirit of Modernity* are very different from those in the first, each addressing the relations between Montesquieu's texts and a precise historical context. For Céline Spector, this is the famous conception of "private vices and public virtues" set forth in Mandeville's Fable of the Bees, which, via the mediation of Jean-François Melon, formed one of the bases for Montesquieu's analysis of monarchy in *De l'esprit des lois*. Spector's analysis of the differences between the notion of "pre-established harmony" in Bernard Mandeville and Montesquieu--the latter abandoning the theological integument that still characterized the notion in The Fable of the Bees, with the silhouette of Smith's "invisible hand" now quite visible--is a small masterpiece of historical and philosophical discrimination. Carrithers himself devotes a similar kind of attention to a very early and seemingly minor text, Montesquieu's response to the Regent Philippe d'Orléans' call for advice in regard to the crushing royal debt left behind by Louis XIV at his death in 1715. Against the backdrop of a detailed description of royal finances, and of alternate proposals for their repair, Carrithers provides a judicious assessment of Montesquieu's "Mémoires sur les dettes de l'état." The result is to cast a good deal of light on his mature stance toward taxation in a monarchical setting in *De l'esprit des lois*. Thirdly, Carol Blum offers a fascinating discussion of Montesquieu's role in the great debate over polygamy, polyandry, and the "sex-ratio," which stretched from Johann Lyserus's scandalous *Polygamia triumphatrix* of 1682 down to the 1770s and beyond. As Blum shows, Montesquieu's "modernity" is very much at stake here, since his contribution to the debates was his suggestion in *De l'esprit des lois* that where the ratio between the sexes altered, not only polygamy but even polyandry might be perfectly "natural"--a provocation that naturally unleashed a storm of conservative protest. Finally, rather in the manner of Carrithers's contribution, the late Louis Desgraves considers another early, out-of-the-way

text of Montesquieu's—his "discours de rentrée" delivered to the Parlement of Bordeaux on the eve of the sale of his office and his retirement from his parliamentary career in 1725. For Desgraves, this was not merely "an occasional work, but the marking of a malaise, the confession of a failure", as well as evidence of Montesquieu's profound knowledge of and sincere commitment to the venal judicial system he was later to defend so eloquently in *De l'esprit des lois*.

In the last part of *Montesquieu and the Spirit of Modernity*, Daniel Brewer and Catherine Larrère consider different aspects of Montesquieu's contribution to modern social science. Brewer's focus is the historical thought of wider French Enlightenment. In this setting, Montesquieu's achievement was to have provided the most advanced model of a genuinely explanatory and causal historiography: "*De l'esprit des lois* represents the foremost attempt in eighteenth-century France to offer a rational explanation of political structures and the processes of transformation to which they are subject" (p. 226). Paradoxically, Brewer concludes, this achievement owed not a little to Montesquieu's own political *partis*, his fear and loathing of absolutism serving as a spur to his insight. Looking forward to the political culture of the Third Republic, on the other hand, Larrère finds that Montesquieu's own politics were now well lost for his countrymen. The *locus classicus* for the modern republican appropriation of Montesquieu was Émile Durkheim's famous Latin dissertation on his contribution to the "social sciences." Larrère's slightly wistful portrait of Durkheim's Montesquieu—rendered "modern" by a process of thorough de-politicization—is a fitting conclusion to the volume as a whole. Surprisingly, perhaps, what looks at first glance to be a collective exercise in Straussian "political philosophy," turns out instead to be an advertisement for the virtues of the historical interpretation of texts. For what the best essays in *Montesquieu and the Spirit of Modernity* point to are the limits of any too-stylized contrast between "antiquity" and "modernity." In other words, sometimes *tertium datur*—the Montesquieu revealed in these pages is neither an "ancient" nor a "modern," but plainly an "early modern," comprehensible to us only by means of the painstaking recovery of the historical context in which he lived and wrote.

LIST OF ESSAYS

- Acknowledgements
 - David W. Carrithers, "Introduction: Montesquieu and the Spirit of Modernity"
- I. OVERTURE
 - Stephen Werner, "Comedy and Modernity: The *Lettres persanes*"
 - II. ANCIENTS AND MODERNS
 - Catherine Volpilhac-Auger, "Montesquieu et l'impérialisme grec: Alexandre ou l'art de la conquête"
 - James W. Muller, "The Political Economy of Republicanism"
 - Diana J. Schaub, "The Regime and Montesquieu's Principles of Education"
 - Elena Russo, "The Youth of Moral Life: The Virtue of the Ancients from Montesquieu to Nietzsche"
 - III. MONARCHY, POPULATION, TAXATION, AND JUSTICE
 - Céline Spector, "Vices privés, vertus publiques: de la Fable des a beilles a De l'esprit des lois"
 - David W. Carrithers, "Montesquieu and the Spirit of French Finance: an Analysis of his *Mémoire sur les dettes de l'état* (1715)"
 - Carol Blum, "Montesquieu, the Sex Ratio, and 'Natural Philosophy'"
 - Louis Desgraves, "Montesquieu et la justice de son temps"
 - IV. HORIZONS OF INTERPRETATION
 - Daniel Brewer, "Thinking History through Montesquieu"

- Catherine Larrère, "Montesquieu and the Modern Republic: The Republican Heritage in Nineteenth-Century France"
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NOTES

[1] Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?* (New York: Free Press, 1959), p. 50; cited by Carrithers in *Montesquieu and the Spirit of Modernity*, p. 7.

[2] Thomas Pangle's *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism: A Commentary on 'The Spirit of the Laws'* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973) is the classic expression of what might be termed the "ultra-modernist" position. But see Carrithers's bibliographical discussion, *Montesquieu and the Spirit of Modernity*, p. 8, note 28, for a sample of contrasting opinions about Montesquieu's attitude England, not a few from a Straussian provenance.

[3] For the most forceful statement of Montesquieu as an "ancient," see Nannerl O. Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France: Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), Chapter Fourteen: "In his youth, Montesquieu cast in his lot with the Ancients against the Moderns; and he never reversed himself. His most fundamental admiration was reserved for the classical polity, the site of true human virtue" (p. 419).

[4] Catherine Volpilhac-Augier, *Tacite et Montesquieu*. Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century 232 (Oxford: the Voltaire Foundation, 1985).

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