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Biancamaria Fontana, *Montaigne's Politics: Authority and Governance in the Essais* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008. vii+207 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. \$29.95, £17.95 (hb). ISBN 978-0691-13122-1.

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Montaigne's *Essais* are an extraordinary *sui generis*, subtle and elusive work, difficult to pin down on an almost every subject, replete with complexities and qualifications (not least linguistically). Biancamaria Fontana, Professor of the History of Political Ideas at Lausanne, comes to the work with a substantial knowledge of the French Enlightenment and its understanding and critique of Montaigne.[1] She is of course not the first writer to contemplate the political views of the essayist [2] but is able to approach his work both from the point of view of political theory and with an ability to set her perceptions in a specific historical context, which is welcome. One of her arguments is that Montaigne anticipates some of the criticisms of the ancien regime characteristic of Voltaire and Diderot, though this dimension of the book is not particularly dominant. Throughout, she shows an understanding for the reasons for Montaigne's many ambiguities. She has set herself a difficult task. The *Essais* are simply not to be plundered for telling quotations which would illustrate the ideas of a systematic discourse. So, to suppose that a political viewpoint can be disinterred from the text by culling passages on this or that subject is futile. Fontana, to her credit, does not suppose she can do this, though she effects a close reading of the text.[3]

It has long been denied that Montaigne had much interest in politics at all and assumed that, with his departure from office at Bordeaux in 1570, he retired to his tower to contemplate the ethical universe with himself as his main subject. Fontana admits at the start that little can be said about Montaigne's life which was not said more interestingly by the man himself. Something, though, needs to be known about his public career since one of the main arguments of the book is that Montaigne, despite his resignation as *conseiller* of the Parlement of Bordeaux, remained preoccupied by public events. In a sense this should be obvious from his acceptance of office as mayor of the city in the 1580s and the fact that he was *gentilhomme de la chambre* both to Henri III and to the king of Navarre. Yet the *Essais* persistently approach the horrors of the age obliquely. Some have suggested that he was evasive and to a degree conservative in his attitudes, that he was fundamentally disengaged from public events. Fontana argues that the various drafts of the *Essais* (and she understands the complex composition of the text during the 1570s and 1580s very well) sought to provide a non-polemical, though still telling and above all unique reading of the problems of his time; indeed, that he was fundamentally critical of the very idea of monarchy.

In two chapters on Montaigne's attitude toward toleration and freedom of conscience, Fontana argues that he took a fundamentally erasmian Catholic view, represented in France by the ideas of Michel de L'Hospital. He did not share the dogged hostility to reform shown by so many of his Parlement colleagues but never took Protestantism as a religion seriously, viewing it (not unusually in his time) as a shamelessly opportunistic manipulation of the people.[4] Catholic repression he found equally abhorrent and contacts with leaders on both sides did not modify this view. In what sense was he, then, a '*politique*'? Fontana argues against this, if what is meant is the usual understanding of the word: a

disposition to put reason of state before religion. On the other hand he plainly found the idea of war for the sake of religion unacceptable. Montaigne in any case, she argues, thought reason of state 'simply an indication of the moral inadequacy and practical deficiency of most human agency.'(p.139) In terms of broader political principles, she argues that his preference was for a republic in the sense that he thought such a system more equitable. He thought monarchy a second-best solution and supported Henry of Navarre for practical reasons, not as a protagonist of absolute monarchy. So, by the end of his life Fontana characterises him as neither Catholic nor Protestant, neither monarchist nor monarchomach, placing him outside the categories of his time in both respects.

"The Essay on Liberty of Conscience" (II, 19), drafted in 1578 and set in the middle of the work, is considered by Fontana fundamental to his view and yet is profoundly difficult to interpret. Why did he choose Julian the Apostate as the central subject of this essay? It is possible that he viewed Julian (whom he admired in a qualified way) as a protagonist of religious coexistence and the rejection of the climate of intolerance represented by Constantine's empire. Julian had had to conceal his true religion as many had had to do in France, and his reversal of the religious establishment had about it a certain doomed grandeur. However, Julian had promulgated toleration from a position of strength, the Valois monarchy from a position of desperation and weakness. In the conclusion to this essay, Montaigne posits two possible conclusions: either that to give rein to factions would sow further division or that by allowing them (as had been done in France) would 'les amollir et relascher.' This is ambiguous, an ambiguity reinforced by the concluding phrase that is not quoted by Fontana: 'et si crois mieulx, pour l'honneur de la devotion de nos roys, c'est que, n'ayants peu ce qu'ils vouloient, ils ont fait semblant de vouloir ce qu'ils pouvoient.' Fontana sets this piece in the context of proposals for religious toleration that began with Michel de L'Hospital and the 1562 Edict of January and the 1561 *Exhortation* of Estienne Pasquier (incorrectly labelled here, p.71, as Chancellor of France). L'Hospital's proposals were based on the assumption that it was possible to distinguish between 'citizenship' (obviously not a term much used in the sixteenth century) and religious loyalty. This was not a view widely accepted in the 1560s. Pasquier argued that the king could preside over a broader and more inclusive view of religious doctrine. Fontana argues that Montaigne could follow neither of these views, accepting his friend La Boetie's argument in his *Mémoire sur la pacification des troubles* that religious dissent and rebellion would always be linked. However, he firmly opposed persecution because of its cruelty and because the courts would always be unable to judge matters of conscience fairly. Fontana traces the intellectual development of Montaigne's attitudes to the problem of whether the civil wars represented a genuine religious confrontation, an issue which in the last couple of decades has, of course, seriously divided historians.[5] The 'single most important aspect of the writer's understanding of the conflict' in Fontana's view was his conviction that the civil wars did not have a religious significance. By this he did not mean that religion was used as a cloak for secular ambitions, as was often claimed at the time, but that most people could not separate religion from other matters

Fontana is quite categorical that Montaigne's ambition was to create 'an independent standpoint'(p.22) and that the novelty of his approach in part stemmed from the fact that, unlike Voltaire, he had no ready-made audience. He was in some sense having to create his audience (p.25). In his early drafts, he seems to have concentrated heavily on the role of chance in military affairs, on the stability of regimes and historical causality. To do so he mustered a formidable array of erudition but soon concluded that no straightforward classification was possible and that there were no obvious rules for predicting success and failure. This led him into territory that was very different from previous attempts at political classification. He did not abandon all hope of positive action (as some readings of the *Apology of Raymond Sebond* have argued) but rather 'a more direct, flexible connection with reality and with living experience' and 'a novel intellectual strategy'(p.12-13). Here his emphasis on passion and emotion was crucial, which Fontana argues was fuelled by 'an overwhelming sense of outrage' (p.15). He did not view injustice and oppression as a natural state of affairs brought about by the fall but rather man-made and ameliorable. He blamed the greed and deficiencies of the ruling classes everywhere, aided and abetted by those lower down who stood to gain by letting this happen. Unlike Machiavelli, Montaigne took the

view that the people would in the end always see through the deceptions of their rulers. Here a further exploration of his friend La Boetie's *Discours de la servitude volontaire* would have provided more food for thought. Fontana is well aware of this work but the relationship between La Boetie's ideas and those of Montaigne is crucial to any understanding of Montaigne's assumptions, though his ostensible dismissal of the seriousness of the work in his essay on friendship raises problems.

In her discussion of the role of trust in public affairs, Fontana underlines that Montaigne thought that people learned 'not from direct experience, but from the experience, recollections, and beliefs of other people'(p.106), a perception reinforced by the importance of the reputation of witnesses at trials. Allied to this was the recourse to some kind of authority, which helped to legitimate the power of political regimes. Rulers derived their authority not from force but from the trust people placed in their ability and entitlement to govern, though such allocations of trust were often irrational. Again, the example of Julian the Apostate is used to argue that the problem with monarchy was that kings did not answer for their actions. For Montaigne, the troubles in France stemmed from distrust of the king's intentions (all too evident of course under Henri III), and he thought that the key was the restoration of this trust, not a single monarch to restore order. The essay on inequality (I, 42) is used to show how Montaigne thought monarchy was undermined by the impossibility of ordinary intercourse between rulers and their subjects. Indeed monarchs lived in a state of servitude to their impossible lives. It is in this essay, incidentally, that we see a further ambiguity in Montaigne's thinking, which seems to indicate that Montaigne thought France in any case a very un-absolutist realm:

De vray, sauf le nom de Sire, on va bien avant avecques nos rois. Et veoyez, aux provinces esloignées de la court, nommons Bretagne par exemple, le train, les subjects, les officiers, les occupations, le service et cerimonie d'un seigneur retiré et casanier, nourry entre ses valets; et veoyez aussi le vol de son imagination. Il n'est rien plus royal: il oyt parler de son maistre une fois l'an, comme du roy de Perse, et ne le recognoist que par quelque vieux cousinage que son secretaire tient en registre. A la verité, nos loix sont libres assez; et le poids de la souveraineté ne touche un gentilhomme françois à peine deux fois en sa vie.

Yet he had just lamented the servitude even of kings in their courts. Observing his king (surely Henri III) seated alone at table, surrounded by unknown petitioners, he seems more deserving of pity:

Et ne m'est jamais tumbé en fantaisie que ce feust quelque notable commodité, à la vie d'un homme d'entendement, d'avoir une vingtaine de contrerolleurs à sa chaize percée; ny que les services d'un homme qui a dix mille livres de rentes, ou qui a prins Casal ou deffendu Siene, luy soyent plus commodes et acceptables que d'un bon valet et bien expérimenté.

In this thought-provoking and stimulating work, Fontana ultimately argues that the *Essais* purposely did not place any special emphasis on politics and submerged it 'into a confusing background of its diverse historical and anthropological narrative' (p.139). The result was, in her understanding, to expose the so-called 'art of government' as a sham. Montaigne was not concerned much with the dogmatic aspects of religion but was preoccupied by the practical enforcement of Christian values in human societies. He had no confidence in the usefulness of natural law or in the idea of Christian rulers as the guardians of that law. Yet, the abandonment of ethical codes and their public maintenance was also perilous. Least of all did he think that political institutions could guarantee those principles. Montaigne perhaps derived from La Boetie the perception that freedom in human societies had constantly to be defended against a tendency for it to crumble in the face of oppression. When he came to the question of authority, Montaigne thought French society was held together by opinion rather than force, but opinion no longer viewed in opposition to some conception of absolute truth but rather in the sense of

‘all human knowledge in the shape of unstable, shifting beliefs.’ Nor were the beliefs of the mass of the people simply the plaything of elite ideas and certainly not easy to control.

## NOTES

[1] See the author’s *Rethinking the Politics of Commercial Society: the Edinburgh Review 1802-32* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); *Benjamin Constant...Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); *Benjamin Constant and the Post-Revolutionary Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); (ed.), *The Invention of the Modern Republic* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); *Politique de Laclos* (Paris: Kimé, 1996). On seventeenth- and eighteenth-century understandings of Montaigne: L. Brunschvicg, *Descartes et Pascal, lecteurs de Montaigne* (Paris, 1995); J. Schwarz, *Diderot and Montaigne* (Geneva: Droz, 1996).

[2] For instance, F.S. Brown, *Religious and Political Conservatism in the “Essais” of Montaigne* (Geneva: Droz, 1963); D.L. Schaefer, *The Political Philosophy of Montaigne* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); N.O. Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 98-116.

[3] This does involve some perhaps controversial interpretations and selection of textual backing that does not always bear the weight of the argument. The footnotes are extensive but, even so, it does prove awkward sometimes to pinpoint the exact text that is being used (especially since there are so many editions of Montaigne and most readers will not have the exact one used here). References to essays by number help, but the texts can still prove elusive, as in the case of the textual backing for Fontana’s crucial argument on p. 98 that Montaigne thought that the numbers of genuinely religious was small, as was the number of those who could genuinely understand doctrinal issues. Their small numbers could therefore scarcely threaten the public peace (chapter 4 notes 34 and 35).

[4] For previous work on Montaigne’s religion: Maturin Dréano, *La pensée religieuse de Montaigne* (Paris: G. Beauchesne et fils, 1936); C. Sclafert, *L’âme religieuse de Montaigne* (Paris: Nouvelles Editions Latines, 1951).

[5] See M.P. Holt, *The French Wars of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and id., “Putting religion back into the Wars of Religion,” *French Historical Studies* 18(1993): 524-51.

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