The Review of Politics 76 (2014), 21–41.
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doi:10.1017/S0034670513000879

Was Montesquieu a Liberal Republican?

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Abstract: This paper sets out to criticize Thomas Pangle's and Paul Rahe's reading of *The Spirit of the Laws* as a contribution to liberal republicanism, arguing instead that Montesquieu's text is better understood as a defense of liberal monarchism. Pangle's and Rahe's interpretation of *The Spirit of the Laws* as an unequivocal defense of the English modern republic is wrongheaded. Montesquieu in fact spent much more of his time and energy outlining another and very different political model, moderate monarchy, embodied not by England but by the government under which he lived—France. This conclusion has profound implications for our understanding not just of *The Spirit of the Laws* but also of the history of early modern political thought more generally speaking, showing that the political debate of this period cannot be reduced to a struggle between classical and modern republicans.

When Montesquieu's masterpiece, *The Spirit of the Laws*, was published in 1748, it received rave reviews from his contemporaries. One of his earliest readers was Mme de Tencin, a famous salon hostess. She had gotten hold of the first copy to reach Paris and she immediately wrote to Montesquieu to express her intense admiration. She also reported that she had had to surrender her copy to their mutual friend Bernard le Bouvier de Fontenelle, who (she said) would have eaten out her eyes had she refused.[1] Another enthusiastic reader was David Hume, who was so impressed with Montesquieu's book that he wrote its author a long fan letter.[2] Of course, not everyone was so enthused—Voltaire famously remarked that Montesquieu's book was incomprehensible and he penned an anonymous critique detailing its many factual mistakes.[3] But such attacks did not substantially diminish the popularity of the work. Throughout the eighteenth century, Montesquieu would consistently be described as an "immortal genius" and *The Spirit of the Laws*

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[1]Robert Shackleton, *Montesquieu: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961) 356.

[2]David Hume to Montesquieu, 10 April 1749, in *Œuvres complètes de Montesquieu*, ed. André Masson (Paris: Nagel, 1950–55), 1217–22.

[3][Voltaire], *L' A, B, C, dialogue curieux. Traduit de L'Anglais de Monsieur Huet* (London, 1762).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670513000879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

became staple reading (or at least referencing) for anyone who wrote anything on politics.

Montesquieu's book has retained the status of a classic until the present day. His role as a master thinker in the history of political thought is generally recognized. In particular, Montesquieu is seen today by many as one of the first truly modern, liberal thinkers in the history of political thought. With his admiring description of the British constitution, Montesquieu (it is argued) laid the intellectual foundations for "liberal republicanism"—a mode of thinking centered on the idea that the participatory republics of antiquity were no longer suitable for modern peoples and that instead they required English-style representative government, separation of powers and private independence. This reading of Montesquieu, which was first elaborated by Thomas Pangle, has recently been restated with particular force and erudition by Paul Rahe in his books *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty* and *Soft Despotism*.[4]

This paper aims to contest Pangle's and Rahe's view. I will argue that their reading of Montesquieu as a genuinely liberal or protoliberal thinker is ultimately untenable.[5] I will develop this argument in two different steps. First, I will show, as a number of other scholars have done, that Montesquieu was never an unequivocal defender of the English model, but that he also championed a very different political system—the French monarchy—as an important alternative to the republics of classical antiquity.[6]

[4]Thomas Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism: A Commentary on "The Spirit of the Laws"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973); Paul Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty: War, Religion, Climate, Terrain, Technology, Uneasiness of Mind, the Spirit of Political Vigilance, and the Foundations of the Modern Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Rahe, *Soft Despotism, Democracy's Drift: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Tocqueville, and the Modern Prospect* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

[5]For two other recent if ultimately very different critiques of the "liberal" reading of Montesquieu, see Céline Spector, "Was Montesquieu Liberal? *The Spirit of the Laws* in the History of Liberalism," in *French Liberalism from Montesquieu to the Present Day*, ed. Raf Geenens and Helena Rosenblatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 57–72; Robin Douglass, "Montesquieu and Modern Republicanism," *Political Studies* 60, no. 3 (2012): 703–19.

[6]This argument was first developed in 1985 by Bernard Manin in explicit refutation of Pangle's thesis (see Manin, "Montesquieu et la politique moderne," in *Lectures de l'Esprit des lois*, ed. C. Spector and T. Hoquet [Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2004], 171–31). More recently, Céline Spector has further developed Manin's view in her *Montesquieu: Pouvoirs, richesses et sociétés* (Paris: PUF, 2004) and *Montesquieu, liberté, droit et histoire* (Paris: Michalon, 2010). The Manin-Spector interpretation of *The Spirit of the Laws* reflects to a certain extent an older tradition in French Montesquieu scholarship. Thus, French scholars such as Raymond Aron (*Les étapes de la pensée sociologique: Montesquieu, Comte, Marx, Tocqueville, Durkheim, Pareto, Weber* [Paris: Gallimard, 1967]) and Louis Althusser (*Montesquieu: la politique et l'histoire*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670513000879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Second, I will take this argument one step further by showing that Montesquieu portrayed this second political model, the French monarchy, as the most important alternative to classical republicanism. It therefore makes more sense, as I will claim, to think of Montesquieu as a defender of a "liberal monarchism" than as the progenitor of a "liberal republicanism" or even of a political pluralism.[7]

This paper will then conclude by reflecting on the broader implications of this rethinking of *The Spirit of the Laws*. Much more is at stake in this debate, as I will argue, than the interpretation of one single text. Reading *The Spirit of the Laws* as a defense of a liberal monarchism rather than of liberal republicanism means that we need to radically revise our understanding not just of Montesquieu's place in the history of political thought, but also of the development of modern political thought more generally speaking.

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Leo Strauss was probably the first scholar to suggest that Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* should be read as a defense of a typically modern, liberal

[Paris: PUF, 1959]) acknowledged Montesquieu's positive portrayal of monarchy. However, both Aron and Althusser saw Montesquieu first and foremost as the proponent of a new and more scientific way of thinking about history and society rather than as a political theorist and in that sense their work differs quite fundamentally from Manin's and Spector's.

More recently, Montesquieu's positive portrayal of the French monarchy has also been highlighted by Anglophone scholars such as Michael Mosher, "Monarchy's Paradox: Honor in the Face of Sovereign Power," in *Montesquieu's Science of Politics: Essays on "The Spirit of Laws,"* ed. David Carrithers, Michael Mosher, and Paul Rahe (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 159–230, and "What Montesquieu Taught: 'Perfection Does Not Concern Men or Things Universally,'" in *Montesquieu and His Legacy*, ed. Rebecca Kingston (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 7–30; Sharon Krause, *Liberalism with Honor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 32–66; and Annelien de Dijn, *Liberty in a Levelled Society? French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 20–33.

[7]It should be noted that in an important recent article Michael Mosher has likewise described Montesquieu as a defender of monarchy "from a liberal prospect" but his reasons for doing so are different from the ones put forward in this paper. More specifically, Mosher argues that Montesquieu's preference for the monarchical model was intrinsic rather than situational, as is argued in this paper. See "Free Trade, Free Speech, and Free Love: Monarchy from the Liberal Prospect in Mid-Eighteenth-Century France," in *Monarchisms in the Age of Enlightenment: Liberty, Patriotism, and the Common Good*, ed. Hans Blom, John Christian Laursen, and Luisa Simonutti (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 101–20.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670513000879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

republicanism,[8] but credit for elaborating this idea and grounding it on an extensive discussion of Montesquieu's text should go to Strauss's student Thomas Pangle. In a groundbreaking book on Montesquieu's "philosophy of liberalism," published in 1973, Pangle energetically defended the thesis that Montesquieu was a truly pivotal figure in the history of political thought, one of the first modern political thinkers and more specifically, one of the first genuinely liberal thinkers.

Pangle did this by portraying Montesquieu first and foremost as a critic of classical republicanism. He drew attention to Montesquieu's long and unflattering account of Greek and Roman city-states in the first eight books of *The Spirit of the Laws*. Republics like Sparta and Rome might promise a free and participatory life to their citizens, but that kind of life came at a high cost. Republican self-government required a willingness to renounce one's own private interests at all times for the public good. Moreover, classical republics had become anachronistic political models. Montesquieu, as Pangle pointed out, was one of the first thinkers to draw attention to the political implications of the eighteenth-century expansion of commerce. In a world characterized by increasing commerce and wealth, individuals simply could not be expected to maintain the devotion to the public good expected of republican citizens.[9]

Montesquieu's alternative to these classical political models—again, in Pangle's reading—was to be found in two long chapters on the British constitution. To Montesquieu, England was a republic based, like the city-states of antiquity, on popular sovereignty. But it was a republic of a new kind, a republic in which liberty did not primarily depend on active citizenship and public virtue, but rather on an institutionalized competition of selfish individuals and private factions. The British system was, in other words, much less demanding of its citizens than the classical republics and it could therefore easily coexist with—indeed it required—the existence of a commercial society, in which citizens pursued their own self-interest rather than the public good. This was in essence the "liberal republicanism" defended by Montesquieu—a mode of thinking which had subsequently become the ideological foundation of the modern, liberal democracies of the West.[10]

It is worth reminding ourselves just how new and exciting Pangle's reading of *The Spirit of the Laws* was. To argue that Montesquieu had a crucial place in the liberal tradition was of course nothing new per se. Older readings of *The*

[8]Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (New York: Free Press, 1959), 50: *The Spirit of the Laws* "reads as if it were nothing but the document of an incessant fight, an unresolved conflict, between two social or political ideals: the Roman republic, whose principle is virtue, and England, whose principle is political liberty. But in fact Montesquieu decides eventually in favor of England." It should be noted that not all Straussians subscribe to this particular reading of *The Spirit of the Laws*. For a divergent interpretation, see Krause, *Liberalism with Honor*, 32–66.

[9]Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy*, 48–106, 200–212.

[10]Ibid., 107–60.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670513000879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Spirit of the Laws such as Robert Shackleton's had likewise depicted Montesquieu as a major liberal thinker. But to Shackleton, Montesquieu's main contribution to the liberal tradition had been his defense of the separation of powers. Shackleton put much less emphasis on the noninstitutional aspects of Montesquieu's thought. Remarkably, in his still important intellectual biography of the Président (as Shackleton called Montesquieu), he did not pay any attention to Montesquieu's defense of commerce. Similarly, while Shackleton remarked upon Montesquieu's disillusionment with classical examples, he did not seem to consider this an especially noteworthy feature of his political philosophy.[11]

As a result of this almost exclusive focus on his institutional prescriptions, Montesquieu had come to be seen as a classic but increasingly irrelevant thinker, in particular in the Anglophone world.[12] Pangle's reading of *The Spirit of the Laws*, however, revealed Montesquieu's text to be a contribution to one of the most important and stimulating political debates of the day. The 1960s and 1970s had seen a spectacular revival of public and scholarly interest in participatory democracy and the intellectual tradition of classical republicanism, an interest that has continued unabated ever since. By depicting Montesquieu as one of the first modern thinkers to develop a coherent alternative to classical republicanism, Pangle aimed to make *The Spirit of the Laws* into a crucial touchstone for participants in this debate.[13]

Pangle more than succeeded in this goal. His book was generally acclaimed upon its publication as one of the most important attempts to rethink Montesquieu's place in the history of political thought.[14] And his

[11]Robert Shackleton, *Montesquieu: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 274–77. As Shackleton put it elsewhere: "The two most important contributions made by Montesquieu to the history of ideas were the theory of the influence of climate on men and societies and the doctrine of the separation of powers" (Shackleton, "Montesquieu, Bolingbroke and the Separation of Powers," *French Studies* 3, no.1 [1949]: 25).

[12]For an example of the decline of Montesquieu's stature as a political thinker among twentieth-century Anglophone liberals, see George Sabine's classic textbook *A History of Political Theory* (London: Harrap, 1937), 551–60. Even though Sabine recognized *The Spirit of the Laws* as a classic text, he downplayed its value for twentieth-century readers. It should be noted that among French political theorists Montesquieu's reputation fared better, but even in France Montesquieu was celebrated for his contribution to the development of a new and more scientific way of thinking about history and society rather than for his political theory. See note 6.

[13]Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy*, 2.

[14]David Lowenthal praised Pangle's book in a review for *Political Theory* as "always informative and intelligent, frequently brilliant and profound" (*Political Theory* 2, no. 4 [1974]: 453). Anne M. Cohler, reviewing *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism* for the *American Political Science Review*, was slightly more critical, but she nevertheless concluded that "I would advise anyone interested in our liberal republican regime or in Montesquieu to read this book" (*APSR* 70, no. 3 [1976]: 963). And in the *Review of*

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reinterpretation of Montesquieu as one of the progenitors of liberal republicanism had a profound impact on subsequent debate. Even though scholars often found fault with the details of his interpretation, many agreed with its basic tenor: that Montesquieu was, to all intents and purposes, a defender of liberal republicanism—a mode of thinking which was at the heart of the modern, liberal democracies of the West.

That this view rapidly became the new orthodoxy—and not just among Strauss's students—is illustrated, for instance, by Judith Shklar's 1987 lecture on Montesquieu. Originally delivered at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and published in 1990, Shklar's lecture described Montesquieu as a defender of a "new republicanism." Although she did not refer explicitly to *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism*, her interpretation of Montesquieu was almost identical to Pangle's: Montesquieu had denigrated the classical republics of antiquity in favor of the commercial English republic as a model for eighteenth-century Europe.[15]

Pangle's influence is even clearer in one of the most important recent contributions to the literature on Montesquieu, Paul Rahe's books *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty* and *Soft Despotism*. Rahe's books, which were both published by Yale University Press in 2009, have rearticulated the idea that Montesquieu was first and foremost a defender of liberal (or, as Rahe terms it, "modern") republicanism. Rahe offers new historical and contextual evidence for this interpretation, which allows him to address many of the criticisms that had been leveled against Pangle's book. Written with considerable erudition and eloquence, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty* and *Soft Despotism* were issued by a prestigious publishing house and received with many accolades.[16] In short, Rahe's

Politics, L. L. Bernard described Pangle's book as a "very valuable and authoritative companion piece to *The Spirit of the Laws*" (*Review of Politics* 37, no. 3 [1975]: 409).

[15]Judith Shklar, "Montesquieu and the New Republicanism," in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 266–78. Jacob Levy in an important article likewise assigns Montequieu a crucial role in the transformation from classical to modern republicanism, although it should be noted that his arguments for doing so are very different from Pangle's. See Levy, "Beyond Publius: Montesquieu, Liberal Republicanism and the Small-Republic Thesis," *History of Political Thought* 27 (2006): 50–90. It should be noted that by describing Pangle's interpretation as the "new orthodoxy," I do not wish to suggest that his views were accepted by all Montesquieu scholars. As I explained in note 6 and as further discussed below, Pangle's reading of *The Spirit of the Laws* has been challenged by quite a number of scholars, but that of course also helps to show that his book became an important touchstone in the debate about Montesquieu's place in the history of political thought.

[16]Rahe's *Soft Despotism* was chosen as an Outstanding Academic Title by *Choice* magazine for 2009 and his books received admiring reviews in prestigious journals such as *Perspectives on Politics* (*Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 4 [2011]: 947–49). It should be noted that Rahe's books, and *Soft Despotism* in particular, have also attracted

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670513000879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

books might very well shape our understanding of *The Spirit of the Laws* for years to come.

In what follows, I will explain why that should not be the case. Pangle's and Rahe's reading of *The Spirit of the Laws*, as I will argue, is ultimately untenable. Instead of propagating a modern republicanism, *The Spirit of the Laws* has a very different message. According to Montesquieu, as I will show, the moderate monarchies of eighteenth-century Europe—of which France was the prime example—were an even more important alternative to the classical republics of antiquity than the English model. Montesquieu should therefore be understood as a proponent of a liberal monarchism rather than a liberal republicanism.

Before outlining my own argument, however, another and very different objection to the Pangle-Rahe thesis needs to be addressed. In the past few decades, a number of scholars have argued that Montesquieu's views on the classical republics of antiquity were much more positive than Pangle had allowed for. Montesquieu, they point out, was not just the author of *The Spirit of the Laws*, but also of a 1734 history of the rise and fall of the Roman Republic, which surely illustrated that he did not consider the Roman example all that irrelevant. More importantly, Montesquieu had lavished praise on the political values embodied in classical republics in his writings. In particular, many passages in *The Spirit of the Laws* suggested that he admired rather than abhorred (as Pangle had claimed) the unwavering devotion of republican citizens to the public good.[17]

All this seems to suggest that Montesquieu should be seen as a thinker who had at least to some extent aimed to revitalize the public virtue and participatory citizenship characteristic of the city-states of antiquity rather than to demonstrate their irrelevance to the modern world. Indeed, some scholars go even further than that. They argue that Montesquieu should be seen as one of the most important eighteenth-century defenders of classical republicanism, rather than as a critic of this tradition. Thus, in Eric Nelson's *The*

their fair share of highly critical reviews; however, this seems to be largely because of Rahe's outspoken views on contemporary politics, instead of his interpretation of *The Spirit of the Laws*. See for instance Daniel O'Neill's review essay "Whither Democracy," *Political Theory* 38 (2010): 564–75.

[17]For a nuanced defense of this view, see N. O. Keohane, "Montesquieu: Constitutionalism and Civic Virtue," in *Philosophy and the State in France: The Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 392–419; and Elena Russo, "The Youth of Moral Life: The Virtue of the Ancients from Montesquieu to Nietsche" in *Montesquieu and the Spirit of Modernity*, ed. David Carrithers and Patrick Coleman (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2002), 101–23. For an excellent more general discussion of the literature on this issue see also David Carrithers, "Introduction: Montesquieu and the Spirit of Modernity," in *Montesquieu and the Spirit of Modernity*.

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Greek Tradition—one of the most important recent contributions to the literature on classical republicanism—Montesquieu is portrayed as a committed republican. According to Nelson, Montesquieu considered the city-states of antiquity to be the most "natural" form of government for mankind—that is, he believed that republican citizenship was most in accordance with the natural duties of mankind.[18]

Is this particular interpretation of *The Spirit of the Laws* convincing? I would argue that it is not. The idea that Montesquieu was actually a defender of classical republicanism can only be sustained through a very selective reading of Montesquieu's texts, *The Spirit of the Laws* in particular. Montesquieu might have admired the polities of antiquity more than Pangle allowed for—but it is clear that he was more of a critic than not. Even though Montesquieu repeatedly praised republican virtuousness, he could also be quite disparaging about the city-states of antiquity. Thus, as Pangle already pointed out, Montesquieu compared life in the republic with a monastic existence, arguing that the public virtue of republican citizens was comparable to the fanatical self-renunciation of monks—a comparison which does not seem to have been intended as a compliment.[19]

More importantly, it is clear that Montesquieu considered the republic to be a model of the past. This was quite literally the case: Montesquieu identified the republican form of government primarily with republics which had long since ceased to exist, such as Athens, Sparta, and Rome. More generally speaking, his description of the republican form of government certainly did not suggest that it would be easily implemented in the context of eighteenth-century Europe: he portrayed republics as suitable only for small nations or city-states with an egalitarian social structure, whereas most eighteenth-century European states were (as Montesquieu himself emphasized) moderate-sized and devoted to luxury and social inequality.[20]

The fact that Montesquieu relegated the republican form of government to classical antiquity is all the more telling because he was of course aware of the existence of modern republics, such as Venice and Holland. He did occasionally mention these contemporary examples in *The Spirit of the Laws*, but they

[18]Eric Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 166. For an excellent analysis of this debate and Nelson's contribution to it, see Johnson Wright, "Montesquieuean Moments: *The Spirit of the Laws* and Republicanism," *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* 35 (2007): 149–69.

[19]Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, ed. and trans. A. Cohler, B. Miller, and H. Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 2:43. Pangle refers to this same passage in *Montesquieu's Philosophy,* 82–83.

[20]Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, III.3; IV.4;V.3–5; VIII.16. For a similar point, see David Carrithers, "Democratic and Aristocratic Republics: Ancient and Modern," in *Montesquieu's Science of Politics*, ed. David Carrithers, Michael Mosher, and Paul Rahe (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 109–58.

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played a much less important role in his account than the classical republics. Moreover, we know from his travel notebooks that he was less than enthused by them: thus, he commented that the Dutch republic had become corrupted and that it would only escape from this corruption by the reestablishment of the stadtholderate.[21] All of this suggests that Montesquieu believed that the preconditions necessary for the flourishing of republics no longer prevailed in eighteenth-century Europe.

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If attempts to interpret *The Spirit of the Laws* as a defense of classical republicanism fall short, does that mean that Montesquieu must be understood as a modern republican, as Pangle and Rahe claim? At first glance, this conclusion seems to have a lot going for it. Montesquieu's discussion of the English example in *The Spirit of the Laws* is generally admiring. More importantly, he does seem to have thought of England as a "modern" republic—that is, as a form of government in which liberty was maintained through representative institutions and the separation of powers rather than through the active, participatory citizenship of the classical republics.[22] Montesquieu described England as a "nation where the republic hides under the form of monarchy" (V.19 [70]) and as a regime in which "the form of an absolute government" masked "the foundation of a free government" (XIX.27 [330]).[23] Moreover, at some points he explicitly depicted the English model as a superior alternative to the classical republics. Thus, in chapter 72 of book XIX, Montesquieu argued that England, with its representative system, had a "great advantage" over the ancient democracies, in which power was directly exercised by the people (a state of affairs which, as Montesquieu argued, gave undue power to populist orators) (XIX.27 [326]).[24]

And yet, this interpretation of *The Spirit of the Laws* is ultimately untenable. More specifically, understanding Montesquieu as a liberal republican pure and simple requires us to ignore much of what he had to say about political life in modern, eighteenth-century Europe. When Montesquieu's text is read as a whole, rather than with a narrow focus on the chapters on England, it becomes clear—as scholars such as Bernard Manin and Céline Spector have pointed out[25]—that Montesquieu defended not one but two alternatives to

[21]Montesquieu kept extensive travel notebooks during his trip; see *Voyages*, in *Œuvres complètes de Montesquieu*, ed. Roger Caillois (Paris: Pléiade, 1949–51), 1:535–874. For his disparaging remarks about Holland, see *Œuvres complètes*, 2:862ff.

[22]However, for an interesting critique of this view, see Douglass, "Montesquieu and Modern Republicanism," 3–6.

[23]Parenthetical references in text are to book and chapter of *Spirit of the Laws*, followed by page number in the translation of Cohler et al.

[24]Montesquieu likewise compared the English model favorably with the classical republics in chapter 6 of book XI (pp. 164, 166).

[25]See footnote 6, above.

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the classical republics of antiquity. In addition to the English "modern republic," Montesquieu also endorsed another and very different political model as a suitable alternative to the ancient city-states: namely, moderate monarchy—a regime which managed to maintain the rule of law and liberty not just without participatory democracy but also without representative institutions or a separation between executive and legislative power.

This becomes clear in particular from the first ten books of *The Spirit of the Laws*. Here, Montesquieu consistently portrayed moderate monarchy as a modern alternative to the republics of classical antiquity. He made clear that monarchies were capable of making individuals work for the common good, just like republics. But monarchies achieved these goals by very different and less anachronistic means than republics. In a monarchy, citizens were not required to renounce their own private interests. Rather, they were brought to work for the common good through the reign of honor. A monarch's subjects were proud and keen to distinguish themselves from others, which meant that they were eager to devote themselves to the public good in return for honorific distinctions—or, in other words, that each individual worked for the common good, "believing he works for his individual interests" (III.7 [27]).

Monarchies, in short, achieved similar goals to republics while making less onerous demands of their subjects. This made the honor-based, monarchical system of government much more suitable for the modern world—a world from which the public virtue so typical of antiquity had disappeared. Thus, Montesquieu compared monarchies to the "finest machines," in which "great things" were accomplished by employing "as few motions, forces, and wheels as possible." In monarchies, he explained, "the state continues to exist independently of love of the homeland, desire for true glory, self-renunciation, sacrifice of one's dearest interests, and all those heroic virtues we find in the ancients and know only by hearsay" (II.5 [25]).

Montesquieu made clear that monarchies were much more suitable than republics for the modern nations of eighteenth-century Europe in other respects as well. Unlike republics, monarchies were more suitable for medium-large territories, since they did not require the strong communal bonds demanded by republican self-government (VIII.17 [125]). Similarly, the monarchical system of government—unlike the republic—was compatible with the existence of social inequality and hierarchy. Monarchies therefore did not require the imposition of sumptuary laws to prohibit ostentatious displays of wealth—indeed, "luxury was singularly appropriate in monarchies" (VII.4 [99–100]). And monarchies were also compatible with the existence of private-oriented religions such as Christianity, which undermined the rigorous devotion to the public good demanded of republican citizens (IV.4 [35]).

Throughout the first ten books of *The Spirit of the Laws*, in short, Montesquieu presented moderate monarchy as a modern alternative to the classical republics of antiquity. He made clear that he considered monarchy to be the most suitable form of government for the modern nations of

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eighteenth-century Europe, with their penchant for luxury and their social inequality and large territories. Moreover, he suggested that monarchy was also a superior form of government more generally speaking, in the sense that it allowed for a devotion to the public good, as did the classical republics, while still leaving room for what Benjamin Constant would later describe as the "enjoyment of private independence."[26]

By endorsing moderate monarchy as a modern alternative to the ancient, self-governing city-states, it is worth emphasizing, Montesquieu was taking a position which by no stretch of the imagination could be described as a defense of a liberal or modern republic. Moderate monarchy was a regime which managed to maintain the rule of law and liberty not just without participatory democracy but also without representative institutions or a separation between executive and legislative power, relying instead on the informal power of the nobility to act as a check on royal authority. Moreover, it was a regime based on honor, the love of vain distinctions characteristic of the nobility, rather than on the self-interestedness of modern commercial man. While outlining this model, Montesquieu by no means had England in mind. Instead, the moderate monarchy he described was an idealized version of the regime under which he lived—Louis XV's France.[27]

It will have become clear by now that Pangle's and Rahe's reading of *The Spirit of the Laws* as a defense of liberal republicanism can only be maintained through a highly selective reading of Montesquieu's text. More specifically, their interpretation requires us to ignore much of what Montesquieu had to say about monarchies in the first ten books of *The Spirit of the Laws*—books in which he pointed to a very different alternative to the classical republics of antiquity than the English modern republic. According to Pangle and Rahe, however, there are good reasons for such a selective reading. Montesquieu, they argue, was actively trying to conceal his preference for

[26]Benjamin Constant, *Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 310.

[27]Montesquieu outlined the main characteristics of this monarchical political model in *The Spirit of the Laws* II.4 and III.5–7. For an excellent analysis of Montesquieu's views on moderate monarchy, see Mosher, "Free Trade, Free Speech, and Free Love," 101–18; and, similarly, but with greater emphasis on the role of honor, Spector, *Montesquieu: Pouvoirs, richesses et sociétés*. It should be noted that some scholars argue that Montesquieu's depiction of moderate monarchy was actually a portrayal of the feudal monarchy rather than of its eighteenth-century descendant; see for instance Franklin Ford, *Robe and Sword: The Regrouping of the French Aristocracy after Louis XIV* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953); Iris Cox, *Montesquieu and the History of French Laws* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1983). However, there is actually no reason to do so, as I argue in "Montesquieu's Controversial Context: *The Spirit of the Laws* as a Monarchist Tract," *History of Political Thought* 34 (2013): 66–88.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670513000879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the English model. He did so for good reasons: he wanted to hide his true meaning from the royal censors. Montesquieu was actually far more critical of the French monarchy than it would appear from a literal interpretation of *The Spirit of the Laws*. One therefore had to read between the lines.[28]

Rahe in particular has made considerable effort in his work to draw attention to the very real threat of censorship which confronted eighteenth-century Frenchmen when they wanted to write about politics. Thus, when Montesquieu's rival and occasional ally Voltaire published his *Philosophical Letters* in 1733—a book in which Voltaire celebrated English politics and society—he attracted the ire of the public authorities and he was forced to flee Paris. He ended up hiding for years on an estate on the border between France and Geneva, safe from the authorities on both sides. Montesquieu, Rahe argues, in order to escape a similar fate, had considerably toned down his criticism of the French political system in *The Spirit of the Laws*, but he had nevertheless "dropped" enough "hints" in order to make his true feelings about the French monarchy clear to the discerning reader.[29]

How plausible is this claim? Was Montesquieu simply afraid to explicitly show his true Anglophile colors? Was his ostentatious praise for the French monarchy simply part of a strategy of obfuscation? There certainly are indications that Montesquieu took the threat of royal displeasure seriously enough to engage in some self-censorship. We know that he continued revising *The Spirit of the Laws* even after the printer had set the proofs. A number of the revisions he made indeed do suggest that he was concerned about upsetting the royal censors. Thus, as Robert Shackleton pointed out, Montesquieu modified a hostile comment on Richelieu and slightly attenuated five criticisms of monarchy.[30] Moreover, Montesquieu made clear on at least one occasion that he expected his readers to interpret rather than merely to absorb his text. "One must not always so exhaust a subject that one leaves nothing for the reader to do," he explained at the end of book XI. He wanted to make people "think" rather than simply "read" (XI.20 [186]).[31]

But this explanation will take us only so far. While Montesquieu might have tweaked his text here and there, it seems highly implausible, to say the least, that he would have developed his extensive discussion of the benefits of a

[28]Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy*, 14–15; Rahe, *Montesquieu*, xx, 87, 195–96. It should be noted that Rahe, unlike Pangle, acknowledges that Montesquieu had many positive things to say about monarchies in *The Spirit of the Laws*. But in Rahe's view, Montesquieu ultimately believed that monarchies were doomed to disappear because of the rise of commerce. See Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty*, 193–210.

[29]Rahe, *Montesquieu*, 196. For Rahe's account of Voltaire's misadventure and its effect on Montesquieu, see ibid., 10–16.

[30]Shackleton, *Montesquieu*, 241–42. Shackleton also points out that Montesquieu engaged in self-censorship for the publication of earlier works such as the *Considerations on the Romans*: see ibid., 154.

[31]Pangle draws attention to this passage in *Montesquieu's Philosophy*, 19.

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French-style monarchy simply for the sake of the censors. Even a cursory perusal of *The Spirit of the Laws* makes clear just how implausible this claim is. Montesquieu dedicated no less than twenty-eight separate chapters to a discussion of the nature and benefits of the monarchical form of government, even excluding the final two historical books, which were devoted to a learned discussion of the origins of the French monarchy. If these pages were nothing but a hoax to confuse the censors, it was such an elaborate one that one wonders how Montesquieu's readers were expected to see through it.

Moreover, Montesquieu showed himself much more prepared to court controversy and conflict than Rahe would allow for. *The Spirit of the Laws* contained numerous criticisms of the Catholic Church and its representatives, as well as more generally of Christianity, criticisms which caused a huge controversy when *The Spirit of the Laws* was published in 1748. Montesquieu was denounced by Jansenist publicists, investigated by the Sorbonne's Faculty of Theology, and placed on the Vatican's Index of Forbidden Books. But he did not budge: instead of eliminating the offending passages, as he had occasionally done in the past when confronted with the threat of censorship, he vigorously defended his book against his detractors. Thus, in 1750 Montesquieu published a book-length *Defense of "The Spirit of the Laws,"* in which he answered his numerous critics point for point.[32]

Based on what we know of the context in which Montesquieu was writing, in short, there is little reason to think that *The Spirit of the Laws* needs to be read as selectively as Pangle and Rahe argue. Even though censorship was a real problem for eighteenth-century French authors, it seems implausible that this would have motivated Montesquieu to hide his true meaning to the extent suggested by Pangle and Rahe. Moreover, as evidenced by his response to the Jansenist and papal criticism of his work, Montesquieu seemed quite willing to court controversy and the possibility of censorship. Montesquieu's praise for the French monarchy and his endorsement of this model as an alternative to the classical republics of antiquity therefore seems all but genuine.

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So far, it has become clear that Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* defended not one but two political models as an alternative to the classical republics of antiquity: the modern republic of England and a French-style monarchy. This means that Montesquieu was not an unequivocal defender of liberal republicanism, but that he also envisaged another and very different way of solving what he himself identified as the main problem of modern societies: creating a political system for a world from which public virtue had disappeared. Montequieu's portrayal of the French-style monarchy as a solution to this

[32]Shackleton, *Montesquieu*, 362, 356–77.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670513000879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

problem shows that his message was—to say the least—much more complex than Pangle and Rahe would allow for.

I will now take this argument one step further. Montesquieu, I will claim, was not simply an ambivalent defender of liberal republicanism, but in a way he was not a defender of liberal republicanism at all. Of the two political models introduced in *The Spirit of the Laws* as alternatives to the classical republics of antiquity, Montesquieu, as I will show, thought of French-style monarchy as the most important to his primary audience. *The Spirit of the Laws* can therefore be read more fruitfully as an endorsement of the moderate monarchy rather than of the modern republic. Or, to put this in slightly different terms: *The Spirit of the Laws* should be read as a defense of "liberal monarchism" rather than liberal republicanism.

Before making this case, however, an important question needs to be addressed. Does it make sense at all to ask which of these two forms of government Montesquieu aimed to endorse? Quite a number of scholars have argued that it does not. After all, Montesquieu repeatedly emphasized in *The Spirit of the Laws* that he believed that the search for the best form of government was misguided. Instead, he argued, for any given society, the form of government that should be considered the best was the one most adapted to the particular circumstances under which a people lived. He also echoed these sentiments in his private notebooks, writing, for instance, that "of all the governments that I have seen, I prefer none in particular, not even the one I love most, because I live in it."[33]

Thus, Montesquieu explicitly rejected the idea that there was a form of government which was ideally the best. This has led scholars such as Bernard Manin to describe him as a defender of "political pluralism"—of the idea that the political good can be realized in many different institutional settings.[34] However, I would argue that reducing Montesquieu's message to a defense of political pluralism misses an important point. While Montesquieu rejected the idea that there was an ideally best form of government, he was firmly convinced that some forms of government were "situationally" best—that is, that some forms of government were better

[33]Montesquieu, *Œuvres complètes*, 2:1040.

[34]The idea that Montesquieu should be seen as a defender of "political pluralism" rather than of one particular political model (the English) was first defended in 1985 by Bernard Manin in reply to Thomas Pangle. See Manin, "Montesquieu et la politique moderne." Manin's interpretation has gained wide currency among Montesquieu scholars. In a contribution to the collection of essays on Montesquieu and his legacy, published in 2009, for instance, the prominent Montesquieu scholar Catherine Larrère has argued that Montesquieu's main contribution to the liberal tradition is his "pluralist vision of the political good" (Larrère, "Montesquieu and Liberalism: The Question of Pluralism," in *Montesquieu and His Legacy*, ed. Rebecca Kingston [Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009], 283–84). For a similar argument see also Spector, *Montesquieu: Pouvoirs, Richesses et Sociétés*.

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suited to particular peoples than other forms of government. One can therefore legitimately ask which regime he intended to recommend to his primary audience—that is, eighteenth-century Frenchmen and Frenchwomen. Or, to put it differently: when his contemporaries read *The Spirit of the Laws*, what would Montesquieu have wanted them to conclude from his book?

In answer to that question, let us first consider whether Montesquieu attempted to endorse the English model rather than the French; whether he attempted, for instance, to make clear that France and other continental monarchies—while also acceptable political models—should eventually evolve in the direction of an English-style modern republic. At the first blush, there seems to be some reason to think so. After all, as is well known, Montesquieu described England as the freest nation in Europe—freer, in other words, than France. In addition, Montesquieu also made clear that commerce and modernity were, in his view, closely linked phenomena—again a view which might imply, as Pangle and Rahe argue,[35] a preference for the English commercial republic as more suitable, in the long run, for modern nations.

However, upon further consideration, neither of these arguments hold up to closer scrutiny. Let us first consider chapter 6 of book XI on the English constitution. While Montesquieu did indeed present England in this chapter as the freest nation of Europe, at the same time he left no doubt that this analysis was not meant to propagate the adoption of the English example in other European countries. Thus, at the end of chapter 6, Montesquieu was careful to emphasize that his description of the English constitution should not be read as an attempt to "disparage" other governments. The "extreme" liberty of the English, he warned, was not for everyone. "How could I say that, I who believe that the excess even of reason is not always desirable and that men almost always accommodate themselves better to middles than to extremities?" (XI.6 [166]).[36]

Neither should Montesquieu's enthusiastic description of the commercial revolution be read as an attempt to disparage the French model. Montesquieu, like nearly all of his contemporaries, did view England as the premier trading nation of Europe. But this does not mean that he thought that France was on the wrong track. Indeed, Montesquieu—who, as a Bordeaux wine merchant took an active interest in matters of trade—was much more sanguine than most of his contemporaries about the commercial

[35]Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy*, 116, 199, 216, 279–305; Rahe, *Montesquieu*, 188–92.

[36]For a similar analysis, see David Carrithers, "Montesquieu et l'étude comparée des constitutions: analyses des régimes anglais et français," in *Actes du Colloque international de Bordeaux 1998* (Bordeaux: Académie de Bordeaux, 1999), 235–42; and Sharon Krause, "The Spirit of Separate Powers in Montesquieu," *Review of Politics* 62, no. 2 (2000): 231–65.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670513000879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

prowess of the French nation.[37] Thus, in the famous book XX of *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu described France—together with England and Holland—as one of the three major commercial nations of Europe (XX.21 [393]). Even though he did emphasize that certain forms of commerce and more specifically the carry trade were unsuitable for monarchical peoples, this was compensated by the fact that they were uniquely qualified to engage in the trade in luxury goods (XX.4 [340]).

The central importance assigned by Montesquieu to the commercial revolution therefore does not seem to have led him to the conclusion that the French should adopt the English model if they wanted to enjoy the fruits of that revolution. Quite the contrary, a close reading of book XX shows that Montesquieu was intent instead on convincing his readers that the French should *not* imitate the English example. More specifically, he warned his countrymen against adopting the English custom allowing noblemen to trade. This custom, Montesquieu warned, would fatally undermine the French political and social order by destroying the nobility "without being of any utility to commerce" (XX.22 [350]). Instead, Montesquieu praised French laws which prohibited nobles from trading, while allowing successful merchants to climb the social ladder by purchasing noble titles. The wisdom of these and similar laws, Montesquieu wrote, explained why "over the past two or three centuries, the [French] kingdom has endlessly increased its power" (XX.22 [351]).

In short, a close reading of *The Spirit of the Laws* by no means suggests that Montesquieu preferred the English model over the French—or that he believed that his readers should. Indeed, when we dig a little deeper, it becomes clear instead that the opposite was true. On several occasions, Montesquieu pointed to the exceptional nature of the English example and to the difficulties of transferring it to the continental nations of Europe. Thus, in book II of *The Spirit of the Laws* Montesquieu points out that, contrary to the French, the English had eliminated all of their "intermediary bodies" (by which he means local and aristocratic privileges)—an example which he clearly did not want the French to follow, since he considered these intermediary bodies a necessary rampart against despotism in a monarchy (II.4 [19]).

With the English model an intriguing but exceptional example, Montesquieu's reader would have been left to conclude that a moderate monarchy was the most suitable form of government for France and for the other continental monarchies of eighteenth-century Europe. In other words, Montesquieu's main message in *The Spirit of the Laws* seems to have been

[37]Montesquieu actually had good reasons to be optimistic about France's future as a trading power, since we know that during the 1730s and 1740s, when Montesquieu was writing *The Spirit of the Laws*, France succeeded in having a rate of growth in overseas commerce that was 2.4 and 3 times that of Britain. See Paul Cheney, *Revolutionary Commerce: Globalization and the French Monarchy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 22.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670513000879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that the best way of persevering liberty and stability in continental Europe was not by introducing representative institutions and fostering enlightened self-interestedness, but by harnessing the informal power of intermediary bodies and nurturing a culture of honor—not a message, in short, which is at all compatible with a defense of liberal republicanism.

That this was indeed Montesquieu's main message—that he considered the French model more relevant to his primary audience than the English—becomes even clearer when we understand just how much more time and energy Montesquieu devoted to his discussion of the former. Whereas Montesquieu devoted but two (albeit long) chapters to the English model, he dedicated no fewer than twenty-eight chapters to a discussion of the French-style monarchy. Moreover, this was also the model which he first introduced to his readers as the main alternative to the classical republics of antiquity (in books II–X), whereas an extensive discussion of the English example had to wait until book XI. Indeed, it is well worth noting that in books II–X—which together comprise about one-fifth of the entire text—the English example is mentioned but twice, and then in order to disparage it.[38] Montesquieu's neglect of the English example in these books is all the more striking because this was the most "political" section of *The Spirit of the Laws*. Indeed, it was in these books that Montesquieu developed his critique of ancient republics as potentially unfree and above all anachronistic political models.

All this suggests that, in Montesquieu's view, it was not the English constitution but French-style monarchy which presented the main alternative to classical republicanism. Even though Montesquieu clearly admired the English example, it was the regime under which he lived—Louis XV's France—which he presented (in an idealized form) throughout *The Spirit of the Laws* as the most important alternative to the classical republics of antiquity. He made this clear by on the one hand portraying the English example as having a limited transferability. Equally telling is the fact that he simply devoted many more pages to his discussion of the French model than he did to a discussion of the English example.

Finally, it can be pointed out that this interpretation of *The Spirit of the Laws* is also supported by what we now know of the reception of Montesquieu's masterpiece by his contemporaries. Especially in the Anglophone world, it was long assumed that Montesquieu's name became all but synonymous with Anglophilia in the second half of the eighteenth century.[39] However, a number of recent studies show that this was not the case—quite the contrary.

[38]A first reference to England occurs in book III, where Montesquieu invokes the failed republican experiment of the English of 1649 in order to illustrate the difficulty of maintaining public virtue in modern times (III.3 [22]). The second reference (at II.4 [19]) is discussed above in the text.

[39]As is argued, for instance, by Paul Rahe, "The Book That Never Was: Montesquieu's *Considerations on the Romans* in Historical Context," *History of Political Thought* 26 (Spring 2005): 80.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670513000879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Both in France and in other European countries, Montesquieu was read first and foremost as a theorist of monarchy, whereas the chapters on England drew much less interest from his continental readers.

In France itself, *The Spirit of the Laws* was frequently enlisted in debates between representatives of what Montesquieu had described as "intermediary bodies" such as the nobility and the *parlements* on the one hand, and royalist pamphleteers on the other. In these pamphlet wars, both sides drew ammunition from Montesquieu's text. Parlementarian writers pointed to the obvious importance which Montesquieu had attached to intermediary bodies and the crucial role he attributed to them in a monarchical regime. Royalists drew attention to the fact that Montesquieu had described these intermediary bodies as "subordinate and dependent" and that he had never wavered in attributing sole legislative power to the king. Both sides agreed, however, that the most important and relevant chapters of *The Spirit of the Laws* were not the chapters on England but those on the monarchy. Indeed, before the epoch of constitution making in 1789, French readers paid little attention to Montesquieu's description of the English constitution.[40]

This was also true in other continental states. In Prussia and the German-speaking world more generally, for instance, his readers skipped what he had to say about the English constitution: here the big debate was about Montesquieu's distinction between monarchy and despotism, and the question whether Prussia qualified as a despotism or not. The same was true in Denmark, where after the publication of *The Spirit of the Laws*, a huge debate erupted over the question whether Montesquieu would have considered Denmark a despotism rather than a monarchy.[41]

This is not to say, of course, that Montesquieu's name was never linked to Anglophilia. Especially in England herself, as well as in her colonies, Montesquieu was embraced as first and foremost a defender of the excellence of the English constitution. This reputation, it is interesting to note, might have been at least partly based on a truncated reading of *The Spirit of the Laws*. Thus, in the spring of 1750, the Edinburgh booksellers Hamilton and Balfour published a little pamphlet of thirty pages, which was made up of the two chapters on England (as was announced by its very title: *Two*

[40]As is argued in Elie Carcasonne, *Montesquieu et le problème de la constitution française au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: PUF, n.d.), which remains the classic study of the reception of Montesquieu's masterpiece in prerevolutionary France. It should be noted that during the French Revolution, Montesquieu's chapter on England and its defense of a separation of powers became much more central to French political debate.

[41]Rudolf Vierhaus, "Montesquieu in Deutschland: Zur geschichte seiner Wirkung als politischen Schriftsteller im 18. Jahrhundert," in *Deutschland im 18. Jahrhundert: Politische Verfassung, soziales Gefüge, geistige Bewegungen* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987), 9–32; Henrik Horstboll, "Defending Monarchism in Denmark-Norway in the Eighteenth Century," in *Monarchisms in the Age of Enlightenment*, 175–93.

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Chapters of A celebrated French Work, entitled, De l'Esprit des loix, Translated into English. One, Treating of the Constitution of England; Another Of the Character and Manners which result from this Constitution). This booklet preceded by several months the full translation of Montesquieu's book by Thomas Nugent and it might have contributed to establishing Montesquieu's reputation in the Anglophone world as the eighteenth century's greatest admirer of the English constitution.[42]

But even in the Anglophone world, it is worth noting, some of Montesquieu's most astute readers understood him to be a defender of honor and moderate monarchy rather than the British constitution as the best alternative to classical republics. That much becomes clear from the writings of one of Montesquieu's more well-known admirers, the Scottish writer Adam Ferguson. Ferguson, a professor of moral philosophy at Edinburgh, a friend of David Hume's and Adam Smith's, in 1766 published *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, which catapulted him into fame and established a new genre of philosophical history. Here, however, the essay is mainly important for its reflections on Montesquieu's book, which Ferguson helpfully summarized for his readers at the end of the first part of his essay.[43]

Ferguson's summary makes clear, first and foremost, that he understood Montesquieu to be a critic of the classical republics of antiquity. According to Ferguson, Montesquieu had made clear that republican self-government required social equality and civic virtue, both of which were sadly lacking in the modern world.[44] But Ferguson did not refer to Montesquieu's chapters on England as providing an alternative to these defunct models. Instead, he provided his readers with a long summary of Montesquieu's description of monarchy and its motivating principle of honor. Montesquieu's message, in Ferguson's view, was clear: the liberty of Europe depended on honor, instead of "the maxims of commerce" or "the misplaced ardours of a republican spirit."[45]

To sum up: of the two models presented by Montesquieu in *The Spirit of the Laws* as an alternative to the classical republics of antiquity—French-style monarchy and the English modern republic—it seems to have been the monarchy which Montesquieu thought was most relevant to his contemporaries, not the English model. In *The Spirit of the Laws*, he made clear that he thought that the English model was not easily transferrable, and more importantly he simply devoted much more time and energy to outlining the French model.

[42]Cecil Patrick Courtney, "Morals and Manners in Montesquieu's Analysis of the British System of Liberty," in *Montesquieu and His Legacy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 31.

[43]Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (London and Edinburgh, 1773). Ferguson promised his readers to provide a faithful "copy" of what the great man had said about political systems (108).

[44]Ibid., 110.

[45]Ibid., 117.

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Finally, what we know of the reception of *The Spirit of the Laws* on the European continent also shows that his contemporaries saw him as a theorist of monarchy and that they neglected the chapters on the English model.

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In this paper, I have argued that Pangle's and Rahe's interpretation of *The Spirit of the Laws* as an unequivocal defense of the English modern republic is wrongheaded. Montesquieu, it has become clear, in fact spent much more of his time and energy outlining another and very different political model: moderate monarchy. This was the model which he portrayed in the first ten books of *The Spirit of the Laws* as the main alternative for the classical republics of antiquity. This was also the model which he presumably meant to recommend to his primary audience, mid-eighteenth-century Frenchmen and Frenchwomen. This interpretation is supported not just by the textual evidence but also by a consideration of the historical conditions in which *The Spirit of the Laws* was composed as well as the way in which it was read by contemporaries.

This interpretation of *The Spirit of the Laws* forces us to fundamentally rethink Montesquieu's place in the history of ideas. Montesquieu, it has now become clear, cannot simply be described as a defender of liberal or modern republicanism—or even as a defender of a political pluralism. Instead, the political ideal endorsed by Montesquieu in *The Spirit of the Laws* can better be described as a "liberal monarchism." In Montesquieu's view, both liberty and a devotion to the common good were best preserved in modern, continental nations within the context of moderate monarchies. As long as such monarchies maintained intermediary powers, such as a powerful nobility, which could act as a check on royal authority, they would remain moderate, just like republics. And as long as their subjects maintained a spirit of honor, that is the desire among monarchical subjects to distinguish themselves from others, monarchies would be able to maintain a devotion to the public good, again just like republics. Monarchies were, in other words, capable of realizing the same political goals as republics, but without placing the same onerous demands on their citizens.

This conclusion, however, immediately raises another question. By revealing Montesquieu's enthusiasm for French-style monarchy, are we not in danger of rendering *The Spirit of the Laws* irrelevant for modern political thought? After all, the French monarchy was to implode a mere forty years after the publication of Montesquieu's masterpiece, in the process making the whole idea of a limited monarchy as obsolete as the Bourbon dynasty. Today, the idea that a moderate monarchy, based on honor and intermediary bodies, should be seen as an alternative to participatory democracy seems misguided at best. The upshot of such an interpretation therefore seems to be that Montesquieu is relegated to the dustbin of history.

This need not be the case, however. First and foremost, one could argue that the study of political texts from the past is interesting precisely because they

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often have very different viewpoints from our own. The study of past political thinkers can allow us to recover normative ideals we have lost, which allows us in turn to question our own ideas and to develop alternatives to them. Montesquieu's defense of honor—which Pangle and Rahe largely ignore—seems strange and perhaps even wrongheaded to us. Yet Sharon Krause, drawing on Montesquieu, has argued that this might be an important if underappreciated resource for the revitalization of liberalism in our own time. Honor, she argues, might be a powerful motive to inspire individuals to engage in risky activities to defend their liberties.[46]

Second, and perhaps more importantly, I would argue that my reinterpretation of Montesquieu has crucial implications for our understanding of the history of political thought. More specifically, it implies that we need to rethink the story we tell ourselves about the development of our political ideals. Over the past few decades, our knowledge of early modern political thought has increased exponentially. Yet the political debate of this period is still presented, by and large, as a struggle between classical and modern republicans.[47] My analysis of *The Spirit of the Laws*, however, shows that there was a third position as well: liberal monarchism. That this position was defended by the most successful and admired political theorist of the eighteenth century shows that it must have been far more important than we tend to assume.[48]

Obviously, more research is needed to chart the dissemination and relative importance of liberal monarchism in eighteenth-century Europe. But the payoff promises to be considerable. Grasping the attraction of moderate monarchy to astute political minds like Montesquieu's might not help us to understand the eventual triumph of liberal republicanism. But it might allow us to throw new light on an equally important question: why the triumph of liberal republicanism came so late in the day—and why a revolution was needed to achieve it.

[46]Sharon Krause, *Liberalism with Honor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[47]The literature on classical republicanism is enormous. For a classic statement, see Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). For the diffusion of classical republicanism in the eighteenth century, see Quentin Skinner and Martin van Gelderen, *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). For "new" or "modern" republicanism, see, among others, Michael Zuckert, *Natural Rights and the New Republicanism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Biancamaria Fontana, ed., *The Invention of the Modern Republic* (Cambrige: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Vickie Sullivan, *Machiavelli, Hobbes, and the Formation of a Liberal Republicanism in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[48]For a similar argument, see Blom, Laursen, and Simonutti, eds., *Monarchisms in the Age of Enlightenment*. Compared with the literature on both classical and liberal republicanism, studies of monarchism, liberal or otherwise, are negligible.

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