

<http://montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/spip.php?article2422>



Nouvelle publication : Vickie B. Sullivan, Montesquieu and the Despotic Ideas of Europe

- Actualités -

Date de mise en ligne : mardi 16 janvier 2018

Copyright © Montesquieu - Tous droits réservés

University of Chicago Press, 2017

Vickie B. Sullivan, *Montesquieu and the Despotic Ideas of Europe. An Interpretation of « The Spirit of the Laws »*, University of Chicago Press, 2017, 304 pages.

ISBN : 9780226483078

À écouter : [entretien avec Vickie Sullivan](#)

Montesquieu is rightly famous as a tireless critic of despotism, which he associates in his writings overtly with Asia and the Middle East and not with the apparently more moderate Western models of governance found throughout Europe. However, a careful reading of Montesquieu reveals that he recognizes a susceptibility to despotic practices in the West – and that the threat emanates not from the East, but from certain despotic ideas that inform such Western institutions as the French monarchy and the Roman Catholic Church.

Nowhere is Montesquieu's critique of the despotic ideas of Europe more powerful than in his enormously influential *The Spirit of the Laws*, and Vickie B. Sullivan guides readers through Montesquieu's sometimes veiled, yet sharply critical accounts of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Aristotle, and Plato, as well as various Christian thinkers. He finds deleterious consequences, for example, in brutal Machiavellianism, in Hobbes's justifications for the rule of one, in Plato's reasoning that denied slaves the right of natural defense, and in the Christian teachings that equated heresy with treason and informed the Inquisition.

In this new reading of Montesquieu's masterwork, Sullivan corrects the misconception that it offers simple, objective observations, showing it instead to be a powerful critique of European politics that would become remarkably and regrettably prescient after Montesquieu's death when despotism wound its way through Europe.

Introduction

Part I. The Ideas of Montesquieu's Modern European Predecessors

1. The Greatness of Machiavelli and the Despotic Disease of His Politics – Both Princely and Republican
2. Montesquieu's Attack on the Political Errors of Hobbes

Part II. Christian Ideas

3. Religious Ideas and the Force of Christian Ones in Modern Europe
4. The Ideas of Early Christianity, Their Absorption in Roman Law, and Their Abusive Reverberations in Modern Europe

Part III. The Ideas of the Ancient Legislators

5. Montesquieu's Opposition to Plato's Belles Idées and Their Diffusion

6. Aristotle's "Manner of Thinking" and the Deleterious Use of His Ideas

Conclusion

Notes

Bibliography

Index