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# **Annellen de Dijn, French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville : Liberty in a Levelled Society ?**

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Annelien de Dijn, *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville : Liberty in a Levelled Society ?*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 222 pages.

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"Montesquieu's shadow has been a very long one indeed." Thus concludes Annelien de Dijn's *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville : Liberty in a Levelled Society ?*, which is an impressive, extremely well-researched work on how Montesquieu's "aristocratic liberalism" shaped political discourse in France for the next century and a half after the publication of *De l'Esprit des lois*. Montesquieu scholars, and French intellectual historians more generally, should read this book.

De Dijn's thesis is that "apart from the classical laissez-faire liberalism, and the democratic, republican-influenced brand of liberalism, yet another variety of liberalism, which can be described as an 'aristocratic' liberalism, was widely prevalent in the nineteenth-century context" (5). By "aristocratic liberalism" she means "a very particular set of ideas, developed by a number of thinkers (not necessarily, or not even predominantly, aristocrats by birth) who drew their inspiration mainly from Montesquieu's *Esprit des lois* (1748) [...] [A]ristocratic liberals believed that liberty should be safeguarded through the checking of central power, rather than through the self-government of the people. Their ideal was that of a pluralist, rather than a self-governing, society, in which "intermediary bodies" (often envisioned as an aristocracy, but not necessarily so) existed between the government and the people. Aristocratic liberals believed that a levelled, atomized society, which lacked such intermediary bodies, offered no protection against despotism." To support this thesis, she looks at a vast array of thinkers, beginning with Henri de Boulainvilliers, and going through the "short" nineteenth century, ending with the establishment of the Third Republic in 1870-1875 and thinkers such as Charles Dupont-White.

Following squarely in the Cambridge-school approach, de Dijn examines political "discourse" ; she "focuses on the way in which these nineteenth-century liberals used a specific political vocabulary, developed by Montesquieu in his *Esprit des lois*, in post-revolutionary France."

In Chapter One, "Political thought in eighteenth-century France : the invention of aristocratic liberalism," de Dijn begins by looking at Boulainvilliers because she thinks that his ideas precede even those of Montesquieu in important ways. She contends that he thought an aristocracy was necessary for the protection of liberty. Events like the expulsion of the Moors from Spain in 1605 and the abrogation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 showed that "the abuse of royal power was an inevitable consequence of the demise of the nobility" (20). De Dijn then turns her focus to the star of the party, so to speak - Montesquieu

For Montesquieu, the difference between monarchy and despotism "was of a more structural nature. While despots ruled unfettered, according to their own caprice, the monarch's power was always checked by the existence of what Montesquieu described as "intermediary powers," rival centers of authority such as the nobility and the parlements. By posing a barrier to the royal governments, these intermediary powers prevented any encroachment beyond its legally imposed limits" (22). She contends that for Montesquieu, "liberty was preserved in the typical continental monarchy through institutionalized insubordination. In particular, the nobility's sense of honour created barriers against arbitrary power. While honour encouraged obedience to the prince, it prevented a blind obedience" (25-26). At the heart of Montesquieu's argument was his apparent desire to defend "monarchical government against its republican detractors. It was his goal to argue that the monarchy as it existed in eighteenth-century France, was equally as capable of preserving liberty as the classical republics of antiquity" (26-27). Indeed, de Dijn thinks that Montesquieu's primary purpose was to "defend the monarchy from republican attacks rather than criticize it" (32). She contends that Montesquieu's *De l'Esprit des lois* provided important intellectual firepower for later thinkers such as Necker, for in this work they "found both a critique of and an alternative to the revolutionary equation between

liberty and equality" (35). While such protests fell on deaf ears after the Revolution, in the years directly "following the restoration of the Bourbon dynasty in 1814, a particular set of circumstances made aristocratic liberty into one of the central political concepts of the post-revolutionary era" (39).

In Chapter 2, entitled "Liberty and Inequality : The Royalist Discourse," de Dijn looks at the discourse of royalist publicists and thinkers immediately following the Restoration. She contends that between 1814 and 1830 royalists developed a coherent analysis that drew heavily on Montesquieu's *De l'Esprit des lois*. The royalists were staunch defenders of liberty, but of a particular kind of liberty which was very different from the republican liberty that had been defended by the revolutionaries (43). For example, in 1832 "A. Creuzé de Lesser, a former prefect and a staunch royalist, published a treatise entitled *De la liberté*, that contained a sustained criticism of the revolutionary identification between republican self-government and liberty [...] Political liberty was not just different from civil liberty, it was often actively harmful to it" (43). So some royalists found the revolutionary ideal of freedom quite harmful. The royalists argued, instead, that the preservation of liberty - and not self-government - "was the hallmark of a free state" (46). To protect this liberty, royalists thought that primogeniture, and a specific legal system, "in which land was kept in the same hands over time through primogeniture and entailments," were necessary. Ultimately, then, royalists found liberty and equality to be incompatible, because levelled social conditions had the result of removing barriers against despotism (67).

When writers in the nineteenth century were considering what political order was most appropriate for France, England loomed large. It too was a kind of monarchy, and royalists studied carefully the extent to which the English model could fit France. As such, in Chapter 3, "A society of equals : the liberal response," de Dijn discusses how many liberals, including Jacques Necker, admired the English political model because it "had shown itself capable of guaranteeing liberty as well as preserving a high degree of political stability during difficult times " (68). What is more, their admiration for the English example led several important liberal thinkers to adopt a position remarkably close to the royalists' aristocratic liberalism" (68). Restoration liberals, on the other hand, argued that the "English socio-political system, propagated so enthusiastically by the royalists, was not a model to be imitated, but an obsolete type of society that would probably decay in the near future ; in any case, it did not offer an example for the French" (80). Issues concerning primogeniture and the causes and consequences of commercial society, such as the fact that property had become essentially mobile, were very important to these writers. In all cases, de Dijn insists that the "liberal discourse" of this time period "started at all times from the assumption that theirs was an equalized, levelled society, and that this condition should be taken into account in the creation of a viable political system" (88).

In Chapter Four, "Liberty in a levelled society : Charles Dunoyer, Benjamin Constant, and Prosper de Barante," de Dijn looks at different liberalisms that arose. She dubs the liberalism of Dunoyer "laissez-faire liberalism" and contends that his writings "seem to vindicate fully the traditional view of nineteenth-century liberalism as an individualist doctrine, which created a radical antagonism between state and individual" (95). Constant, by contrast, "believed that individual liberty could only be safeguarded if post-Revolutionary France actively participated in government to make sure that the governing classes - be it the king's ministers or the representatives of the people - did not abuse power. Or to put it in terms closer to Constant's own, he believed that civil or modern liberty could only be safeguarded through a measure of political or ancient liberty" (97-98). De Dijn contends that public spiritedness was absolutely critical for citizens being free, according to Constant, and that the government should actively encourage public spiritedness. De Dijn thus appears to suggest that Constant sought to blend the liberty of the ancients and moderns together, and so she seems to offer a somewhat novel portrayal of Constant. Barante, for his part, equated liberty with the security of each individual citizen, and de Dijn suggests that he clearly borrowed his conception from Montesquieu.

These political and philosophical debates were not merely abstract discussions ; instead, they centered on addressing real, pressing political issues, such as reforming the Chamber of Peers, the debate about decentralization in the Restoration period, and liberty of the press. De Dijn discusses these debates in Chapter 5, "The new aristocracy : a theme in Restoration liberalism." Having adopted Montesquieu's perspective that "an aristocratic

intermediary body was necessary for the preservation of liberty and stability in post-revolutionary France," many liberals were initially enthusiastic about the Chamber of Peers ; later, though, they gradually became more critical of the hereditary chamber (111). Reason being, they thought that the Chamber of Peers, which was composed of government pensioners, had "become an instrument in the hands of the government on which it was financially dependent" (113-114). Restoration liberals also broadly agreed that decentralization was necessary, but for different reasons. Some advocated decentralization because they thought a certain relationship between the central and local government was necessary, others thought decentralization would encourage public spiritedness, and still others thought that decentralization was necessary because the aristocracy was no longer a sufficient check (115-118). During this time, many Restoration liberals came to see the territorial aristocracy as obsolete, and advocated other alternative means of checking power, such as new intermediary bodies composed of a new elite or public opinion (125-127).

Chapter 6 focuses on one of the most prominent 19th Century French liberals, Alexis de Tocqueville, and is aptly entitled "The dangers of democracy - Orléanist liberalism and Alexis de Tocqueville." De Dijn claims that Tocqueville's new political science was "first and foremost an attempt to formulate an alternative to the doctrine of aristocratic liberalism" (137). Tocqueville saw many threats to liberty throughout society and he advocated a multi-pronged approach to protecting it. Liberty, for Tocqueville, "was defined by the existence of guarantees against arbitrary government" (139). De Dijn writes that Tocqueville's thought one should protect liberty through "self-government, through a representative body on the national level, directly exercised on the local level, was the only alternative to despotism in post-revolutionary societies" (141). Yet this self-government came with risks, chief among them the tyranny of the majority ; as such, counter-weights were needed against democratic predominance. Still, Tocqueville found that the greatest threat to freedom "came from the 'individualism' typical of levelled societies, a sentiment which predisposed each citizen to isolate himself from the rest of the population, and to withdraw into a private sphere " (146).

De Dijn proceeds to argue that the themes of aristocratic liberalism were widespread all the way through the 1850s and 1860s, though they represented a sort of amalgamation of thinking from the previous century or so. They were still influenced by Montesquieu's aristocratic liberalism, but also Tocqueville's analysis of the dangers of democracy. What is more, they "reached back to the themes developed during the Restoration period" and re-appropriated many elements of the royalist discourse such as "their condemnation of revolutionary egalitarianism, their idealization of England and primogeniture" all while remaining committed to "the democratic myth developed in the Restoration period, which denounced all attempts to revive the aristocratic past as an impossible enterprise." The consequence of this was that these liberals despaired of imitating the English model as well as the decentralist model (155-156). They also were convinced of the danger of a single, popular legislature (157), and even entertained restoring the territorial aristocracy (171).

The Epilogue offers analysis of the Third Republic. While the constitution of the Third Republic "clearly showed the distrust of its framers *vis-à-vis* popular democracy" (185), between 1875 and 1879 the Third Republic became a "parliamentary republic, with the centre of gravity of power lying inside the elected assemblies, rather than in the executive. In turn, popular control over the legislative was quite considerable" (186).

Perhaps more importantly, de Dijn closes by explaining how her book contrasts with or adds to the literature on these subjects. She explains : "the evidence presented in this study questions the traditional distinction between Anglo-American political thought, based on the principle that power must be checked and divided, and a French tradition supposedly propagating an *étatiste* view on politics, in which either king or popular will reigned absolutely. Many French political thinkers, it has become clear, far from adhering to an absolutist conception of politics, were almost obsessed with the idea that power needed to be checked. The difference between Anglo-America and French political thought, one might argue, is rather that the French were more concerned with the creation of barriers within society itself than with the establishment of constitutional checks and balances, as embodied in the British or American constitutions [...] Montesquieu's lessons were not ignored by his countrymen ; on the contrary, French

liberalism was to a large extent a liberalism à la Montesquieu" (189). Still, nineteenth-century French liberals adapted Montesquieu's doctrine to their historical situation while continuing to emphasize the need for intermediary powers (190). As such, de Dijn explains that "this study illustrates the capacity of a particular approach to intellectual history for excavating the convictions and views of political actors in the past, even though we no longer share these convictions and views today. By unearthing a particular discourse that has more or less disappeared from the present-day record, this study has aimed to enrich our understanding of the diversity and richness of modern political thought" (193).

Still, this thorough and well-written book has some shortcomings, or is at least narrow in certain ways. Consider, for example, what de Dijn writes in the Epilogue : "At the same time, however, it is possible to argue that the study of aristocratic liberalism does not just satisfy our historical curiosity, but that it also helps us to understand the pedigree of certain tropes used in present-day political debates. While key tenets such as the identification between aristocracy and liberty are no longer a part of our political culture, other themes propagated by aristocratic liberals have survived into present-day political debates" (193). De Dijn offers precious little of this kind of analysis of how her study of aristocratic liberalism still bears on societies today. One reason her analysis is limited in this way is that she follows the Cambridge-school approach, and in particular that of Quentin Skinner, too closely. Her focus is on the "discourse" of the thinkers she studies, but this still begs the larger question of whether and how not only their discourse, but their ideas, remain relevant, to say nothing of whether they were good ideas. One might say, for example, that while we no longer ought to desire a territorial aristocracy, the need for intermediary institutions of other sorts, or the need for different kinds of checks on power, remains. If de Dijn had told us not only how "other themes propagated by aristocratic liberals have survived into present-day political debates" but, perhaps more importantly, whether they should survive, the study would be stronger.

Given the venue for this review, it seems appropriate to focus the rest of my remarks on de Dijn's treatment of Montesquieu and how his thought impacted later thinkers. Despite the fact that the argument of the book is essentially that Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* resonated loudly with many liberals throughout the nineteenth century, de Dijn gives relative short shrift to Montesquieu's political philosophy. In total she only directly addresses Montesquieu over less than 13 full pages. This seems curious given the importance she attaches to his ideas. The consequence of this brevity is that de Dijn is unable to fully treat some of the other important aspects of Montesquieu's thought that bear greatly on her topic. For example, what of the other government types that Montesquieu seems to treat favorably, such as the mixed regime, aristocratic republics, and federal republics ? If Montesquieu viewed these as potentially viable - and good - forms of government, then de Dijn's classification of Montesquieu as an aristocratic liberal becomes problematic, because Montesquieu may not have recommended aristocratic liberalism to many different peoples. Indeed, this cuts to the core of de Dijn's argument. I would suggest that Montesquieu argued for a spectrum of acceptable political, economic, and moral outcomes. There are others who contend that Montesquieu was in fact a partisan of the English regime, yet de Dijn does not engage their work.

What is more, there is much more to Montesquieu's political philosophy than his treatment of intermediary institutions. In a book about "liberalism" and therefore liberty, de Dijn leaves out many important passages, including Montesquieu's famous definition of liberty in XI, 3, as well as Books XI, XII, and XII, which are about political, personal, and economic liberty. Additionally, while de Dijn references the idea of "liberty in a levelled society" frequently, she does not consider Montesquieu's analysis of what he viewed as the most powerful mechanism for leveling society : commerce. Indeed, Part IV, where Montesquieu praises commerce, is a necessary part of understanding Montesquieu's perspective on liberty, prosperity, and politics more generally. So too is Book VII, on luxury.

In terms of de Dijn's contribution to the literature, there are other scholars who have commented on the aristocratic elements of Montesquieu's liberalism. They include Jean-Jacques Chevalier, Louis Althusser, Sharon Krause, and Céline Spector. [\[1\]](#) De Dijn could have distinguished her work from theirs by engaging it directly.

Finally, when de Dijn evokes the "republicans" who criticize the monarchy, of whom is she rightly speaking ? Consider, for example, that she does not mention Jaucourt in the Encyclopedia, who pulls Montesquieu direction that is less aristocratic.

Nonetheless, this book warrants scholars' attention, as it points us to a constellation of sorts in the liberal tradition that is often overlooked.

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[1] See for example J.-J. Chevalier, "Montesquieu ou le libéralisme aristocratique," *Revue internationale de philosophie*, 1955/3-4, p. 330-345 ; Louis Althusser, *Montesquieu. La politique et l'histoire*, Paris, PUF, 1959 ; Sharon Krause, "The Politics of Distinction and Disobedience : Honor and the Defense of Liberty in Montesquieu," *Polity*, 31/3, Spring 1999, p. 469-499 ; Céline Spector, *Montesquieu. Pouvoirs, richesses et sociétés*, Paris, PUF, 2004.