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Marisa Linton, *The Politics of Virtue in Eighteenth-Century France*. Basingstoke, UK, and New York: Palgrave, 2001. xi + 258 pp. Notes and index. \$60 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-333-94959-5.

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Marisa Linton's *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France* is a contribution to what is now a vast recent literature on the intellectual and ideological origins of the French Revolution. This literature includes, among other achievements, scrupulous new taxonomies of the political ideologies of the Old Regime, major reassessments of the Enlightenment and its relation to the Revolution, and novel syntheses on such key topics as religion, nationalism, gender, and republicanism. But there is a surprising lacuna in this writing. As every student of the period knows, few terms were more central to the political vocabulary of eighteenth-century France than "virtue." If anything, the course of the Revolution, down at least through the Jacobin "Republic of Virtue," raised its fortunes still higher—not to mention linking virtue indelibly with "terror." Yet for all this centrality, the idea of virtue itself has attracted remarkably little direct attention in the historiography of the last twenty years. Surprisingly, there is no recent survey of its meaning and uses available in any language.

This is the gap that *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France* sets out to fill. As her title suggests, Linton has aimed at something different from a traditional exercise in the "history of ideas." Rather than isolate the idea of virtue as a single object of study, Linton proposes to restore the term to two kinds of larger context, familiar enough from recent debates in intellectual history. One is linguistic: to grasp the meanings of virtue in eighteenth-century France is first and foremost a matter of identifying and analyzing the various *discourses* in which virtue, like any other significant concept, was embedded. "Discourse" is used here, Linton explains, in a sense closer to Pocock than to Foucault (p. 10). Even if one particular "discourse" of virtue came to dominate the French scene—that, roughly, of classical republicanism—the emphasis is nevertheless on the multiplicity and plasticity of discursive traditions over time. At the same time, Linton by no means confines her attention to language alone. The other context at hand is the wider sphere of politics itself—the conflicts and conjunctures that marked the decline of the Bourbon monarchy as it stumbled into the Revolution. Here, virtue is treated as *rhetoric*—a tool used intentionally by political actors for very specific purposes, though often with wholly unintentional results.

This dual methodological approach governs the architecture of the book's narrative, which can be roughly divided into three parts. A first set of chapters is primarily "discursive" in focus, mapping the various traditions or languages in which the idea of virtue figured prominently. The author no more than gestures at the wider history of the notion, from Greco-Roman antiquity onwards, with its various catalogues of the virtues, cardinal or Christian. In France itself, Linton argues in her first chapter, there were three traditional discourses of virtue available at the turn of the eighteenth century: a dominant *royalist* tradition, focusing on the virtues of the king—overwhelmingly apologetic in character, though the example of Fénelon suggests that discrete criticism was possible as well; a residual tradition that associated virtue with the French *nobility*, given new life in the early eighteenth century by the notorious Boulainvilliers; and, far offstage, what might be termed the "emergent" discourse of classical republicanism.

In Linton's view, the turning point in the term's fortunes came with the "intellectual ferment" of the years 1745-54, when the major reception of English political thought of the century coincided with a sharp upswing in public criticism of the Bourbon monarchy. Her second chapter focuses on three books published in these years, which set the terms for subsequent debate. Diderot's translation of Shaftesbury's *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue* (1745) and Toussaint's *Les mœurs* (1748) together introduced what was in effect a fourth major discourse on virtue, grounded in Enlightenment naturalism, which fully secularized the notion, detaching it from any mooring in revealed religion. At the same time, Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* (1748) bestowed an invaluable publicity on classical republican notions of virtue. Indeed, by declaring that virtue was the subjective "principle" that governed republics—doing for them what "honor" did for monarchies and "fear" for despotisms—Montesquieu accomplished something like the permanent politicization of the notion in France. Of course, the author of *De l'esprit des lois* was far from having republican sympathies himself.

But it was no accident that the succeeding decade saw the consolidation of the *oeuvres* of the two major proponents of classical republicanism in eighteenth-century France, both of whom placed virtue at the very center of the theories—Rousseau and Mably, the objects of Linton's third chapter. Diderot's and Toussaint's successors, on the other hand, were the great novelists of "sensibility" of mid-century—Marivaux, Duclos, Crébillon *fils*, and Prévost—whose narratives, making central use of the categories of virtue and vice, accomplished a parallel "moralization" of the private sphere of individual destinies. From here, as Linton describes it in her fourth chapter, it was a short step to the synthesis of these discourses in a composite picture of the "man of virtue" in the epoch of the High Enlightenment, in a wide range of writing. By this point, the marriage of classical and modern values had produced an ideal that was—potentially, in any case—both profoundly egalitarian (naturalist foundations having severed linkages of virtue to aristocracy) and deeply political (the primary civic virtue having become *bienfaisance*, a form of social benevolence).

The convergence of classical republican and Enlightenment discourses on virtue in a single critical current was an ominous development for the Bourbon monarchy, of course. Thus Linton turns, in the second part of *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France*, to the "rhetoric" of virtue—the ways in which this current was turned against the monarchy in its final decades, playing a key role in the ideological origins of the Revolution. First, the monarchy and its propagandists unwittingly furnished their enemies with a dangerous weapon in their attempts to appropriate new conceptions of virtue—*bienfaisance* in particular—for monarchical purposes. Never likely to succeed in the case of Louis XV, these efforts saddled his hapless successor and his foreign queen with "moral" standards they could not hope to meet: the name of the queen was to become synonymous with *vice*, in fact.

Equally damaging to the monarchy was its abortive attempt, beginning in 1770, to reform the contentious upper judiciary in France, the network of venal *parlements* above all. The universal appeal to public virtue by all participants in the ensuing uproar was to open a "Pandora's box," in Linton's eyes. By the time the "Maupéou crisis" was wound up in 1774, with the restoration of the institutional *status quo ante*, initiative had passed permanently to the hands of "patriotic" critics of the monarchy, who presented themselves successfully as the "virtuous" defenders of a traditional constitution. In her final chapter, Linton considers the last years of Bourbon absolutism, when private scandal, public strife, and impending state bankruptcy combined to produce three final twists in the development of the language of virtue prior to the Revolution: an ominous social polarization in its usages, which increasingly contrasted the "virtues" of a universalist Third Estate with the particularist "vices" of the nobility; a final burst of writings on the social virtues and *bienfaisance*; and a set of last attempts on the part of various political actors—crown, nobles, ministers—to appropriate virtue for their own purposes, all in vain. What was the upshot of what Linton describes as "the triumph" of the rhetoric of virtue between 1774 and 1788? She carefully avoids inflated claims for the causal impact of ideological or "discursive" change. There is no sense in which the striking success of the vocabulary of virtue in the "public sphere" of the Old Regime—and its intertwining with adjacent concepts such as "nation" and "*patrie*"—can be

said to have "caused" the French Revolution. Linton provides no general account of the Revolution's origins, but her preferences would seem to be to seek an explanation in the more traditional—less "discursive"—domains of the martial failure and fiscal collapse of the absolutist state. The most that can be said is that in the context of this collapse, the rhetoric of political virtue was there to provide "a linguistic framework through which it was possible to criticize some of the shortcomings of absolute government on the grounds of civic responsibility" (p. 171).

Moreover, to the limited extent that the choice of this language *did* serve to undermine respect for the monarchy, this was, for the bulk of political thinkers and actors of the time, a thoroughly unintended consequence. This was to change, of course, with the Revolution and the scope it seemed to offer for political reconstruction on a hitherto unimaginable scale. *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France* ends with a brief coda, sketching the role of "virtue" in the "creation of revolutionary politics." For it was only in the Revolution that the language of virtue—and the discourse of classical republicanism in particular—could really come into its own, after so long a process of development. Nor was it necessary to wait for the Jacobin "Republic of Virtue" for this, since this language, in roughly its Montesquieuan form, dominated the National Assembly from the very start. For all of the continuity in the language of virtue, however, the Jacobins could take credit for one decisive innovation in its usage—the equation between virtue and "terror," established canonically in Robespierre's notorious speech of February 1794. Without denying the "trauma" of this innovation, Linton delivers a firm *fin de non-recevoir* to the thesis of a "necessary" link between a politics of virtue and one of terror, such that one led "inevitably" to the other: "This development followed on from, rather than led, events ... At once vague, absolute and all-encompassing, the language of virtue had the potential to be deadly. It did not have to be a language of terror, but in the context of the political trauma of 1792 to 1794, that is what happened" (p. 213).

For some readers, especially those who are inclined to seek a "discursive" culprit for the Terror, this conclusion will be seen as an anti-climax, at the least. Linton's recourse to a conjunctural explanation at this point, however, is very much in line with the argument of her book as a whole, which is consistently cautious and prudent in advancing causal claims. One of the great strengths of *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France* is Linton's refusal to narrow her focus to a single discourse of virtue - much less a single writer, as in the risible tradition of *c'est la faute à Rousseau*. The reader emerges with a lively and convincing sense of the irreducible variety of definitions and uses of virtue in the thought-world of eighteenth-century France.

Another strength is Linton's ability to integrate intellectual history proper, and its fine-grained analysis of concepts and textual meaning, with other domains of historical analysis and explanation—in particular, the political realm in which the "rhetoric" of virtue had its effects. The result is not merely an able survey of the variety of different conceptions of virtue in circulation in Enlightenment France, but a powerful narrative of the apparently unstoppable advance of a novel political language. As with any such narrative, criticism attaches more to omissions than to difficulties with the overall shape of the story, which is wholly convincing. One lacuna is particularly to be regretted, even if openly acknowledged by the author - the lack of any extended reflection on the role of gender in the construction of notions of virtue in the eighteenth century. In fact, Linton has not avoided the topic. In the wake of *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France*, she published an extremely thorough survey of the topic, paralleling the narrative in her book, in a two-part study in *History of European Ideas*.^[1] As she remarks tactfully, it is unfortunate that "the economics of modern publishing" prevented the integration of this material in *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France*, where it would certainly have enriched the picture, if not substantively altered it (p. 3).

Beyond this, it also seems clear enough that the conclusion to the book is too slender to bear the weight that the narrative places upon it. Of course, *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France* does not promise to escort its readers onto the terrain of the Revolution. Still, from the opening epigraphs to the final reflections on the Terror, it is obvious that the narrative points in only one direction, the

Revolution providing both climax and denouement to the story at hand. Linton's brief remarks on the discourse of virtue in the revolution of 1789 and demurrers in regard to an "inherent" link between virtue and terror seem sound enough. But their full demonstration would probably require a treatment as detailed and nuanced as the present book. Among other things, Richard Whatmore's recent *Republicanism and the French Revolution* makes it clear that the "discourse of virtue" was not a matter of classical republicanism alone, but was equally central to the thought of the advocates of modern republicanism who emerged in the late 1780s and the early years of the Revolution.[2] As for the Jacobins, Marisa Linton herself has published a fine recent reconsideration of Robespierre's political outlook, in a judicious essay that possesses all the virtues of *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France* itself.[3] In any case, it is safe to say that there remains a good deal of work to anticipate in regards to the "politics of virtue" in the Revolution. In the meantime, it is good to have *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France*, which can now take its place as the indispensable introduction to the subject.

NOTES

[1] Marisa Linton, "Virtue Rewarded? Women and the Politics of Virtue in Eighteenth-Century France," parts I and II, *History of European Ideas*, 26, 1 (2001), pp. 35-49; 51-65.

[2] Richard Whatmore,

Republicanism and the French Revolution: An Intellectual History of Jean-Baptiste Say's Political Economy (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); see Chapters 3-5 in particular.

[3] Marisa Linton, "Robespierre's Political Principles," in C. Haydon and W. Doyle (eds.), *Robespierre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 37-53.

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