MONARCHISMS
IN THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT
Liberty, Patriotism, and the Common Good

Edited by Hans Blom, John Christian Laursen, and Luisa Simonutti
MONARCHISMS IN THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT
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Contents

List of Contributors  ix

Introduction  3
HANS BLOM, JOHN CHRISTIAN LAURSEN, AND LUISA SIMONUTTI

PART I: MONARCHISMS AND REPUBLICANISMS IN THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF SPINOZA, BAYLE, FÉNELON, HUME, AND MONTESQUIEU

1 Spinoza on *Res Publica*, Republics, and Monarchies  19
HANS BLOM

2 ‘Absolute, Not Arbitrary, Power’: Monarchism and Politics in the Thought of the Huguenots and Pierre Bayle  45
LUISA SIMONUTTI

3 Bayle and Hume on Monarchy, Scepticism, and Forms of Government  60
SALLY JENKINSON

4 Fénelon’s ‘Republican’ Monarchism in *Telemachus*  78
PATRICK RILEY
Contents

5 Free Trade, Free Speech, and Free Love: Monarchy from the Liberal Prospect in Mid-eighteenth Century France 101

Michael Mosher

PART II. ENLIGHTENED CHRISTIAN AND MILLENNARIAN MONARCHISMS

6 Caesar Augustus in Vico’s *New Science*: Monarchy as Remedy for Democracy 121

George Wright

7 ‘Everything Must Be Redone’: Condillac as Critic of Despotism and Defender of Toleration 144

Gianni Paganini

8 The Fifth Monarchy Redux 162

Richard Popkin

PART III: DEFENDING AND RESISTING ABSOLUTE MONARCHY

9 Defending Monarchism in Denmark-Norway in the Eighteenth Century 175

Henrik Horstbøll

10 Popular Philosophy and Absolute Monarchy 194

Johan van der Zande

11 The Prussian Monarchy and the Practices of Enlightenment 217

Michael Sauter

12 Theorizing Enlightened Absolutism: The Swiss Republican Origins of Prussian Monarchism 240

Simone Zurbuchen

13 Intellectual Resistance to Absolute Monarchy in Eighteenth-Century Prussia: Castillon’s Translation of Blount’s Philostratus 267

John Christian Laursen
PART IV: REFLECTIONS ON THE BRITISH MONARCHY

14 Monarchy in the Name of Britain: The Case of George III 285
J. G. A. POCOCK

Index 303
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MONARCHISMS IN THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT
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Introduction

HANS BLOM, JOHN CHRISTIAN LAURSEN, AND LUISA SIMONUTTI

There are too many misleading clichés and stereotypes about monarchy and monarchism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and this volume is designed to contribute to the process of correcting them. Especially in the United States, there is almost no recognition that anyone ever saw any redeeming value in monarchy or monarchism.\(^1\) When reminded that more than half of the richer and more modern countries in Europe are still monarchies (as is Canada), both Americans and Europeans will deny that they are really monarchies and claim that this is just pageantry. Many take it for granted that a real monarchy must be socially backward, politically repressive, intellectually unjustifiable, the last gasp of feudalism, and fit only for the dustbin of history. However, as the chapters in this book make clear, to many otherwise ‘Enlightened’ thinkers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, monarchy was the answer to serious problems with republics, and the home of liberty, patriotism, and the public good.

One of the chief causes of misleading ideas about monarchy and monarchism in the early modern period is a marked tendency to view monarchism as one essential whole, to be contrasted with the separate essential whole that is republicanism. But there are at least two problems with this. First, there were many monarchies and monarchisms, so that we should speak in the plural if we mean anything beyond a specific case.\(^2\) Second, even in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries people were aware of overlaps and a complex intertwining between monarchisms and republicanisms in the justification of any actual government, no matter what it was labelled. They spoke of republican monarchies and monarchical republics. Famously, England was known by many as a republican monarchy, where the king ruled in cooperation with Parlia-
ment and the people. Less famously, the same could be said for Sweden, Poland, and various other countries at different times. Many of our chapters evaluate the perceived degree of interpenetration of monarchy and republic in particular cases.

Related to the assumption of essentialism is a stereotype of the static imperviousness to change of an idealized monarchy, cultivated by both supporters and opponents for opposite reasons. It is worth noting that republics, too, could have this syndrome, as much as monarchies: Venice was known for its serenissima stability – just another way of describing the phenomenon. And recent research has suggested that monarchy could also be as dynamic, full of change, even chaotic, and as much of a modernizing force as any other social or political factor. For example, although for a long time the Spanish monarchy of the sixteenth century was regarded as a backward failure in contrast to the forward-looking republican values of its Dutch subjects, scholars argue now for its essentially modern institutions, character, and policies.3 There were good reasons why monarchy ‘remained the most important and most widely accepted form of government in medieval and early modern Europe’ and why ‘Europeans made this choice in full acknowledgement ... of the manifold problems and challenges’ that monarchy brought with it.4 As Timothy Blanning has argued, the British and the Prussians made a ‘successful transition to modern monarchy’ by adapting to changes: the monarchs ‘reinvent[ed] themselves as the patriot kings or servants of the state that the new conditions called for.’5

Then there are the associations of monarchy with arbitrary tyranny and despotism. This was, of course, cultivated by opponents of monarchy with all of the ideological force and propaganda effect they could muster. Good publicity, however, does not make anything true. An important recent publication has traced the history of the idea of tyranny from ancient times to the present, and our chapters add nuance to its findings.6 As others have noted, Parliament (the republican elements in English politics) and the republican States General in the Netherlands could at times behave with more absolute power than Louis XIV because of their higher legitimacy among the people.7 Nicholas Henshall has argued that the notion of absolutism is so tainted with exaggeration and rhetorical excess that it should be dropped entirely from our vocabulary.8 Nevertheless, as Simone Zurbuchen shows, absolutism may have its uses, as long as the reality it describes is carefully disentangled from the political and ideological purposes to which it has been put.
Some of the following chapters explain exactly how a particular monarchy might be distinguished from a tyranny.

We could have organized these chapters by country. Then we would have two or three chapters – depending on how each were counted – on the intellectual scene in each of England, France, and the Netherlands, four on Prussia, with one on Naples and one on Denmark. But conceptualizations of political matters in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were almost always put together from Europeanwide materials, and often even included reference to Asia and the Americas. Writers had one eye on the domestic reader and the other on the international république des lettres. Strictly speaking, then, there was no such thing as a pure and insulated ‘English’ or ‘French’ or ‘Prussian’ monarchy, but rather ideas about monarchism written by an Englishman or German or Frenchman with special reference to one or more of these places, but always with explicit and implicit comparisons and contrasts to others. Our cases include such pregnant peculiarities as Swiss republicans writing in defence of Prussian monarchy and Huguenots in exile in the Netherlands explaining how the French monarchy ought to be run. Englishmen could call for more republicanism within their monarchy, while theorists in the republican Netherlands could idealize monarchy. We have not, therefore, organized the chapters by chronology or nationality, but by canonic figures and some of the themes that their work illuminates.

To many people, the overwhelming weight of the concept of monarchy is its contrast to democracy and republicanism, but this may not be its most important legacy. Let us examine this by starting with those who depend so much on contrasting monarchisms with republicanisms: today’s republican sympathizers.

**Monarchisms vs Republicanisms**

There is a genre of recent studies of the history of political ideas that is designed to promote republicanism. To much of this genre, monarchy is the unexamined ‘Other’ of republicanism. For example, Maurizio Viroli might have been less strident and desperate in the Foreword to his 2002 book, *Republicanism*, had he had more familiarity with the monarchical tradition. Viroli asserts that it is impossible to live free in an unfree monarchy (17) and that subjects are very different from citizens (26). This is not necessarily true, as Tocqueville and many others
have known, and only gains its rhetorical force from the ambiguity of language. Many have thought, as we shall see, that it is actually possible to live freer in monarchies than in republics and that monarchies can treat their subjects as citizens. In his own terms Viroli can be excused for his flourishes, since he admits that republicanism is mostly a matter of rhetoric and emotion, not of truth and reality. But then, monarchisms could fight back with the same weapons. Surely much of their carefully crafted appeal was also to rhetoric and emotion.

Viroli’s rhetorical distinctions between monarchies and republics break apart in at least two ways. First, he admits that the tradition of republicanism is built on Aristotle’s call for a combination of the one, the few, and the many, and thus all republics will include the monarchical element of ‘the one’ (27). He also cites Montesquieu on the value of the rule of law (37); but Montesquieu makes it clear that the rule of law is more a feature of monarchies than of republics. Both of these points have the effect of placing features of monarchism at the heart of republicanism rather than as its Other.

Viroli’s easiest targets are caricatures of absolute monarchy in which domination of some over others is complete (49). There are, however, serious questions about whether any such thing ever existed, and whether anybody ever defended it. With dependence of a sort that he thinks may arise in monarchies, Viroli writes, there can be no civil culture (53). This argument is plainly contradicted by several of the essays in this volume. Finally, Viroli wants to defend a republican patriotism that is immune from the cancers of nationalism (14–15). It may be just as likely that something of the sort could be created in a monarchy as that it could be fashioned in a republic.

From the point of view of the historian, there is little doubt that the recovery of the republican tradition has been one of the great achievements of the discipline in the past thirty years. But even some of this work suffers from the typical flaw of any recovery: exaggeration of the importance and attractions of that tradition. Another 2002 work with the title Republicanism, this one edited by Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner, provides further points of reference concerning recent studies of republicanism. The subtitle of this two-volume set is ‘A Shared European Heritage.’ It need hardly be pointed out that monarchism is also a shared European heritage – in fact, it is a shared worldwide heritage. The introduction to the first volume begins with the claim that ‘whatever else it may have meant to be a republican in early-modern Europe, it meant repudiating the age-old belief that monarchy
is necessarily the best form of government’ (1). We have already seen that in many places throughout Europe and over a long period elements of both forms of government were combined as republican monarchy, and one could not repudiate a part of it without changing the whole. Van Gelderen and Skinner go on to say that ‘paradoxically ... the upholding of civic liberty was not invariably taken to require a republican constitution in the strict sense’ (3). Indeed. But they do not see that it is an anachronism to assume that this is a paradox. As several of the chapters in this volume reveal, monarchism and republicanism grew up together, symbiotically, and to many early modern thinkers it was no paradox to find civil liberty in monarchies.

Finally, van Gelderen and Skinner make it clear that one reason for studying republicanism is to find a usable past (6), and yet no serious effort is made in their volumes to understand alternatives to it. Without applying the same care to the study of monarchism, we will never know if we have found the best usable past. The case can and has been made that some of the emerging democracies around the world might do better with the centralizing and stabilizing effects of monarchy than they will with the decentralizing and destabilizing effects of some practices of republicanism. It should be evident that we do not refer here to autocratic or totalitarian monarchies, but rather to liberal monarchies along the lines of the Spanish monarchy of Juan Carlos I. We do not mean to make any such case here, but only to point out that it is possible. We should assert here, up front, that few or none of our authors consider themselves monarchists in the sense in which some historians of republicanism consider themselves republicans. But both as a matter of getting the history right, and avoiding the pitfalls of being too selective, we might consider that we cannot expect to hear much if we listen to one hand clapping. Yet that is what we are doing if these are the two alternatives and we look only at republicanism and not at monarchisms. It also follows that if these are the main alternatives, we cannot fully understand monarchisms in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries without understanding their positions relative to republicanism. The present volume of essays on monarchisms should take its place on a shelf with those on early modern republicanism mentioned above.

A different approach is suggested by many of the essays in this volume and that is that monarchisms and republicanism were not alternatives, not polar opposites. Rather, they were almost always mixes and blends, as Aristotle pointed out long before the rise of the European monarchies. Thus, most debates were not about the form of government but
rather had more to do with its output in specific conditions. The substantive concerns of most of the authors discussed here had more to do with war and peace, commerce and empire, private life and public duty, progress or decay, than with debating the rival forms for their own sake. What really counted was which form – more likely to be mixed than pure – could ‘deliver the goods.’ Alexander Pope captured the point that no form of government will secure public happiness unless it is administered with integrity:

For Forms of Government let fools contest;
Whate’er is best administered is best.\textsuperscript{12}

From the rest of his poem, we know that Pope preferred a hierarchical government drawn together by a monarch.

**Monarchisms and Republicanisms Together**

In his exploration of the understanding of monarchy among two outspoken theorists of Dutch republicanism, Pieter de la Court and Benedict de Spinoza (Chapter 1), Hans Blom notices an interesting shift from the former to the latter. De la Court established the principle that political institutions are meant to protect people from their rulers’ passions, but it was Spinoza who demonstrated that on that very principle a well-instituted monarchy would be more reliable than the aristocratic republic actually possessed by the Dutch in his time. This peculiarity of Spinoza’s political thought has seldom been noticed, partly because of misunderstandings of the nature of Spinoza’s political program and partly because of underrating or overlooking his connection to de la Court. Blom argues that Dutch republicanism was a precarious ideology for the commercial republic, and furthermore, that it might well have been from a Ciceronian reading of Spinoza’s *Tractatus Politicus* (1676) that Montesquieu developed his critique of republicanism in *The Spirit of Laws* (1748).

The French Protestants, or Huguenots, stand out in our awareness of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century political thought as a stateless people, exiled from their native France for religious reasons and struggling to understand what that might mean.\textsuperscript{13} Several chapters in this book examine the complicated relationship of the Huguenots of the second Refuge to the French monarchy. The biggest paradox here is Pierre Bayle, long known as a monarchist and theorist of absolutism – and yet
Bayle’s *Historical and Critical Dictionary* is also widely known as the ‘arsenal of Enlightenment.’ If, as some authors would suppose, Enlightenment and monarchism are such polar opposites, how can Bayle be explained?

Luisa Simonutti, in Chapter 2, finds that although no single uniform Huguenot monarchism can be identified, Huguenots in the Netherlands, such as Bayle, were at pains to emphasize their loyalty to the French king, partly in an attempt to revive the Edict of Nantes and partly to escape censure by French Catholics like Antoine Arnauld. Bayle initially set out to deny any right of resistance, and only later let his strong theory of toleration lead to a limited right of resistance in conditions of religious persecution.

Sally Jenkinson compares Pierre Bayle’s attitudes towards monarchism with those of David Hume (Chapter 3). She submits that, while both of these philosophers followed the sceptical mode in philosophy, their views on politics were not sceptical – but institutionally pragmatic. Like Bernard Mandeville, who was surely drawing on Bayle, both realized that freedom of thought requires an effective state and that, even with their serious shortcomings, monarchies may generally be more apt to provide stability. Essential to an understanding of the work of both thinkers as advocates of an enlightened society is that they were more interested in reform of the relationship between civil authority and public religion than in issues concerning what should be the appropriate form of government. For Bayle and Hume the emerging secular state transcended the old issues that had pitted republicans and monarchists against each other.

Patrick Riley traces the political austerity and simplicity of François de Fénelon to his religious-theological principles (Chapter 4). As Riley points out, it is, indeed, a great irony that a person who idolized asceticism and mystical withdrawal from the world was also an archbishop, duke, and prince of the Holy Roman Empire! Fénelon proposed an ascetic monarchy that could be understood as ‘republican monarchy,’ and it should come as no surprise that Louis XIV withdrew his support for him: Riley sees Fénelon’s republican monarchy as the direct ancestor of Rousseau’s Lycurgus and Numa and thus concludes that the ideas of one of the most famous republicans of the eighteenth century are rooted in monarchist theory.

Michael Mosher examines Montesquieu’s attempts to reinvent the French monarchy (Chapter 5). In his philosophical science of politics Montesquieu criticized the harsh prerequisites of a republic and praised
the liberating capacities of monarchy. He propounded a concept of monarchical liberty that would appear to foreshadow much of modern liberalism, except perhaps in its treatment of religion. As an icon of modern constitutionalism *The Spirit of the Laws* has two faces: the ‘British’ division of powers, and honour as the underlying principle of politics. The effectiveness of the honour system may well derive from the complexity of the ‘ranks and orders of society’ that it underwrites.

**Enlightened Christian and Millenarian Monarchisms**

Two chapters in this book address what might be called the monarchism of enlightened Christian orthodoxy, and one looks at millenarian monarchism. In tracing Giambattista Vico’s rejection of the senatorial system of the Roman republic in favour of monarchical rule, George Wright takes Vico’s philosophical history of civilization into consideration (Chapter 6). The three ages of gods, heroes, and men, according to Vico, must end in widespread corruption and scepticism, false eloquence and its abuse, and the fall from a perfect liberty to the perfect tyranny of anarchy. Vico’s gloomy vision of man’s incapacities is only checked by the certainty that he proposed: once reason has delivered itself from religion, it might also find its way to monarchy as the form of government best adapted to human nature when reason is fully developed. Otherwise, it would seem that Providence has arranged for society to return to the chastizing forces of brutalized nature and to enforce sociability upon men by reducing them to brutes.

Gianni Paganini offers us a much more optimistic picture through his analysis of Etienne Bonnot de Condillac’s enlightened version of civil Christianity (Chapter 7). Condillac finds that all kinds of chaos, rebellion, and murder are to be attributed to the worldly and political ambitions of churchmen. If, however, ecclesiastics were kept fully in check, Condillac argues, the true meaning of Christian monarchy would emerge, in which citizens are good citizens because they are good Christians and Christians are good Christians because they are good citizens.

Richard Popkin takes us to the other end of the spectrum, from the monarchism of self-described enlightened and orthodox Christians to millenarianism, a phenomenon that is often neglected in studies of the history of political ideas in this period (Chapter 8). And yet, if people in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had been asked, ‘Who is your king?’ large numbers of them might have answered, ‘Jesus Christ’ or ‘the Messiah.’ This is because many Europeans – both Jews and Chris-
tians – were believers in one form or another of millenarianism, the view that the earthly reign of Christ or the Messiah was coming soon or was, perhaps, already here. This was sometimes known as Fifth Monarchy theory.

Popkin shows that fifth monarchism thinking was alive and well in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and, indeed, is still alive today. Napoleon and contemporary would-be liberators of South America are some of the many individuals who have taken advantage of the idea of the heavenly monarchy, and of its supporters. The conviction that the republican project is irredeemably flawed because of its dependence on corruptible citizens and on citizens’ limited capacity for virtue drives some to seek refuge in the transcendental world of a monarchy of God’s dispensation, a notion that continues to inspire some religious movements to this day.

Re-evaluating Absolute Monarchism

The construct known as ‘absolute monarchy’ has been much contested, as we have already pointed out. To early Marxists, absolute monarchy was the rule ‘of the feudal nobility in the epoch of transition to capitalism,’ while more recent Marxists treat absolutism as a failed attempt by the bourgeoisie to use the monarchy to create the economic conditions for capitalist expansion. To yet other critics, absolute monarchism is a paradox in which the reforming impulses of absolute rule provoke opposition from both traditionalists averse to reform and supporters of the very principles of rational reform. In his 1893 essay on politics, Wilhelm Roscher argued that enlightened absolutism was the last and most perfect phase of monarchy, in which rationality and efficiency as principles are linked to the ideas of the Enlightenment. Following Jean Bodin two centuries before him, Roscher concluded that absolute sovereignty could thus be seen as the best method of trading fearful freedom for safe submission.

The chapters on absolutism begin with Denmark, the single most constitutionally absolute state in Europe during the eighteenth century. The Irishman Robert Molesworth made this point the heart of his critique, in his book *The Case of Denmark* (1694) – if largely for his own purposes in British politics. The paradox here was that Denmark was a successful state and not the home of tyranny and oppression. Henrik Horstbøll traces the history of monarchy and monarchism in eighteenth-century Denmark from its absolutist beginnings in 1665 to its
reconstitution after the crisis of the 1770s (Chapter 9). Horstbøll uses the texts of the historians and antiquarians who described the historical conditions of Norse monarchy and discussed the differences between the tyranny of the oligarchic nobility and the exceptional nature of Norse monarchy. It comes as no surprise, however, to read that the Danish monarchy privileged security and justice over political freedom.

The chapters on Prussia also lead to a more nuanced understanding of absolute monarchy in what is widely taken to be one of the strongest cases of that kind of government. Johan van der Zande raises the question of just how committed to absolute monarchy Prussian publicists writing in the later part of the eighteenth century really were (Chapter 10). He discusses the views of Johann Georg Sulzer, Friedrich Nicolai, and Christian Garve, all of whom were exponents of what was called ‘popular philosophy’ in Germany. Applying republican values to a monarchical state, they argued for republican freedom under an absolute monarch – lest citizens lose their moral integrity and autonomy. Wary of the enslaving aspects of absolutism – their patriotism notwithstanding – their hope was vested in Frederick II (the Great) who alone, they believed, would be able to bring together the aims of the Enlightenment and good government with citizen-patriots.

Michael Sauter, however, brings our attention to the continuity between Frederick the Great and his nephew and successor (Chapter 11). In presenting the career and political agenda of Johann Christoph Woellner, chief minister of Frederick William II, Sauter shows the delicate balance required in the politics of an Enlightenment administrator. Woellner was interested in promoting the economic power of Prussia by liberating serfs and empowering peasants, while at the same time holding the belief that strong moral and educational supervision of the people was necessary. Agricultural progress therefore went hand in hand with measures supporting religious control. But, Sauter concludes, this paternalist supervision was neither intended nor implemented as oppression or suppression, and therefore Woellner’s edicts on religion and censorship are to not be regarded as signs of reactionary repression or as an end to enlightened politics in Brandenburg.

Simone Zurbuchen analyses the initially surprising point that some of the intellectual support for the Prussian monarchy was provided by Swiss republicans (Chapter 12). She begins with Swabian writer Thomas Abbt’s critical reaction to Montesquieu. Abbt’s central contention was that liberty does not depend on the constitution of the state, but on the good judgment of its ruler(s). Patriotism has a pivotal role, according to
Abbt, as the single political virtue that unites citizens to the state and that makes the intelligentsia provide the good and wise judgment needed by the monarch. Having applied this theory to Swiss republican leaders, Swiss writer Johann Georg Zimmermann found little evidence of good judgment, and so he pointed towards the civil guarantees that a monarch could provide to ensure the liberty of citizens. Immanuel Kant weighed in on this debate with an acceptance of monarchy, if it ruled in a republican way, and Kant’s critic Johann August Eberhard made the case for the liberty and patriotism fostered by enlightened monarchy against the possibilities offered by corrupt republics. Finally, Swiss writer David Wyss took up the defence of republicanism, stressing that patriotic rulers will eventually be replaced by despots, and that the rule of law is more reliable than patriotism. Zurbuchen concludes that ‘enlightened absolutism’ remains an appropriate term for characterizing some of the political ideas circulating in the late eighteenth century.

In concluding the arguments for and against absolute monarchy, John Christian Laursen offers a case study that should help put an end to stereotypes about Enlightenment and resistance (Chapter 13). In sheer numbers, most intellectuals in the period under consideration were believing Christians, and the radicals were not always the underdogs. Laursen presents Frederick II of Prussia as an intellectual radical who ordered a pious mathematician to translate an impious classical text. To this the mathematician responded by Christianizing the text, using his erudition to subvert the radical message. Thus, absolute monarchy was subverted on behalf of Christianity.

**Reflections on the British Monarchy**

The British monarchy, as already mentioned, was one of the most clearly implicated in the mixing and blending of monarchy and republic. As radical a thinker as Bernard Mandeville could write in favour of the court Whigs in 1720 precisely because he could see in them the best chances of maintaining the kind of intellectual liberty in which he could thrive. He did not hesitate to reprimand the republics: ‘In Switzerland the Bayliffs are petty Tyrants in every District, and in Holland the Magistrates of every City are Arbitrary in many Things.’ But ‘Great Britain is a Compound [of] Monarchy, Aristocracy, and Democracy’ and ‘there is not a Country, great or small, where the Men of the highest rank can do less Injury to their Inferiours, and even the lowest with Impunity.’²¹ Several chapters in this book examine this complex of issues. In the con-
including chapter, J.G.A. Pocock distills half a century of study of British political thought into an analysis of what he considers to be the foundations of the British monarchy during the first forty years of the reign of George III (1760–ca. 1800). The very term ‘British’ referred to a multiple monarchy uniting the crowns of England, Scotland, Ireland, and colonies in much-contested ways. In one available tradition, as we have already seen, monarchy and republican elements of the British constitution were inseparable. But English nationalism also rose to contest George’s tutor, and later minister, Lord Bute’s Scottish influence on the king, and all of these factors attracted a specific form of criticism – the country not being sufficiently free, and hence untrue to its own principles – that George III had to counter. The American rebellion was a challenge, but it never really took hold at home in Britain; thus George III found himself defending the notion of king-in-parliament against the appeals of the Americans directly to him. India and France were more important, and here George had to put up with the first anti-war movement in history, which split the country in new ways. But he survived it all, only to slip deeper into mental twilight. He was the ‘last of the personal monarchs and the first of the sentimental,’ in Pocock’s judgment.

At the end of his contribution, Pocock makes the British monarchy the model of reference for his description of the United States as a modern monarchy. This is all the more remarkable because it is precisely that nemesis of the Americans, George III, who becomes the model for the eventual dynastic politics of the Bushes and Kennedys.

We hope that the essays in this volume challenge the oversimplifications and stereotypes of monarchy that prevail so widely. They substantiate the mutual interplay of ideas and practices of republicanisms and monarchisms by at least two strategies. They show that monarchisms were discourses about essential problems in any political system as much now as then, and they illustrate the dynamic character of different monarchisms both in their own terms and concerning their own internal issues, and in interaction with republican ideas.

Monarchisms thus were part and parcel of the political thought of the Enlightenment and its debates on liberty, patriotism, and the public good. In many respects theories of monarchy contributed to a better understanding of the mechanisms that allow complex institutions to connect citizens to the body politic through the rule of law, effective economic policy, and the promotion of scholarship and learning. One
does not have to be a monarchist today to appreciate the seventeenth-
and eighteenth-century theorizing that explored these issues.

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and Eighteenth Century Studies at the University of California. Los
Angeles. The editors are grateful to Peter Reill, Director of the Clark
Library and Center, and to his efficient and friendly staff.

Notes

1 Paul Downes has called an unexamined sense of monarchy the ‘Other’ of
American democracy, in Democracy, Revolution, and Monarchism in Early Ameri-
can Literature (Cambridge 2002).
2 For a catalogue of great variety, see Horst Dreitzel, Monarchiebegriffe in der
Fürstengesellschaft: Semantik und Theorie der Einherrschaft in Deutschland von der
Reformation bis zum Vormärz, 2 vols. (Cologne 1991), and Horst Dreitzel,
Absolutismus und ständische Verfassung in Deutschland (Mainz 1992).
3 See Henry Kamen, Philip of Spain (New Haven 1999); Henry Kamen, Spain’s
Road to Empire: The Making of a World Power, 1492–1763 (London 2002).
4 Robert von Friedeburg, ‘Preface,’ in R. von Friedeburg, ed., Murder and Mon-
archy: Regicide in European History, 1300–1800 (Houndmills 2004), ix.
6 Mario Turchetti, Tyrannie et tyrrannicide de l’Antiquité à nous jours (Paris 2001).
The key reference point for legal definitions of tyranny for early modern
thinkers was the work of Bartolo di Sassoferato of the fourteenth century.
7 R. Oresko, G.C. Gibbs, and H.M. Scott, ‘Introduction,’ in Oresko, Gibbs, and
Scott, eds., Royal and Republican Sovereignty in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge
1997), 15.
8 Nicholas Henshall, The Myth of Absolutism: Change and Continuity in Early Mod-
see R. Asch and H. Duchhardt, eds., Der Absolutismus – ein Mythos? Struktur-
wandel monarchischer Herrschaft in West- und Mittel-europa (ca. 1550–1700)
(Cologne 1996).
9 Maurizio Viroli, Republicanism (New York 2002); orig. Repubblicanesimo
(Rome 1999). See also Fiorella de Michelis Pintacuda and Gianni Francioni,
ed., Ideali repubblicani in età moderna (Pisa 2002).
10 Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner, eds., Republicanism: A Shared Euro-
11 For the long view worldwide, see W.M. Spellman, Monarchies 1000–2000


14 See the chapters on the enlightened orthodoxy of Pluquet, the Yverdon *Encyclopedia*, and Bergier, in J.C. Laursen, ed., *Histories of Heresy in Early Modern Europe* (New York 2002).


18 Karl Otmar Freiher von Aretin, ‘Europa im Spannungsfeld zwischen Aufklärung und Absolutismus,’ in Helmut Reinalter and Harm Klueting, eds., *Der aufgeklärte Absolutismus im europäischen Vergleich*, (Vienna 2002), 21–32. The *Innsbrucker Forschungsstelle, Demokratische Bewegungen* is preparing a *Lexikon Aufgeklärter Absolutismus*.


20 It is worth pointing out that the benefits of monarchy were not thought to be mere control of the mob or of powerful men, since republics always claimed to keep things under control. Rather, the monarchists claimed that their system functioned better in multiple respects. See Martin Fuhrmann und Diethelm Klippel, ‘Der Staat und die Staatstheorie des aufgeklärten Absolutismus,’ in Reinalter and Klueting, eds., *Der aufgeklärte Absolutismus*, 223–43.

21 See Bernard Mandeville, *Free Thoughts on Religion, the Church, and National Happiness*, ed. by Irwin Primer (New Brunswick 2001), 186, 167.
PART I

Monarchisms and Republicanisms in the Political Thought of Spinoza, Bayle, Fénelon, Hume, and Montesquieu
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When in the very first years of the seventeenth century the young Hugo Grotius set out to write a eulogy of Holland, he did it in the form of a comparative description of ancient Greece, Rome, and the Batavian Republic. This was remarkable in various respects, as much for the ambiguity of the term ‘Batavian’ as for the choice of the countries compared. In Book III of this *Parallelon rerumpublicarum*, the only one extant of the three planned, the discussion is limited to the mores and customs of the three states. Although we consequently do not know how Grotius addressed the issue of the respective forms of government in detail, the description of their political cultures in Book III leaves no doubt about the general thrust of his conclusions.

For Grotius, the Athenians were perfidious and moreover torn apart by their dangerous preference for democracy. In this respect the Batavians were far superior, as from time immemorial they were known for their faithfulness and trust (the *fides Batavorum*), as we learn from Tacitus and other Roman historians. Moreover, the Batavians preferred a mixed constitution, based on contract (applying the bona fides), and thus were assured of a general unity between the rulers and the ruled. Young Grotius, who was to be engaged over the next decade as historian of the Dutch Revolt, was sure that the Batavian Republic would not be plagued by democratic upheaval, even though it had been – and still was – the scene of a war of defence against the Spanish Crown and its tyrannical policies. Through no fault of their own the Batavians – faithful and obedient – had been forced to take up arms. For what reasons? Grotius explains that, although the Batavians once had been bound by oath to the Romans, moral decay set in shortly after the destruction of Carthage – the unfaithfulness of the Carthaginians proved to be conta-
gious – and made the ancient Roman trust disappear, as was still visible in the treacherous Roman Empire and the Spanish Hapsburg kingdom.\(^2\)

The Batavians from time immemorial had been governed by their councils of aristocrats, generally with the help of a Count appointed by the councils to represent the country and lead the army. In his historical survey Grotius put to use the classical humanist style of *emendatio*. The Dutch Republic not only outshone previous great and ancient states, but also proved its legitimacy as a form of government. The Batavians were the true heirs to the original Roman republican tradition, and if Grotius had to refer to Greek predecessors, he would point to Sparta rather than to Athens. Faithful and true to themselves, the Batavians were not prone to let their self-interest take precedence over their word, as the Athenians did, nor to expansionist aggression, since they considered peaceful trade to be both honest and useful. For Grotius, ‘reason of state’ was what other powers practised, at times obliging the Batavians to rely on war as a last resort in self-defence.

Little over half a century later, Pieter de la Court repeated the exercise in his *Political Balance*, describing all forms of government both classical and contemporary in order to locate the Dutch Republic – or rather its Batavian core: Holland and Zeeland – within the traditions of European governments. De la Court had no doubts regarding the basic terms of comparison. The Athenian democracy appeared to be the most similar to the seventeenth-century Dutch system, described by de la Court as an ‘aristocracy that comes closest to a popular form of government.’\(^3\) Although the political allegiance here is somewhat different from that of the young Grotius, the importance of ‘reason of state’ as the ‘Other’ of Dutch politics is as noticeable as it was in Grotius. De la Court explains that monarchies suffer from the unbridled passions of their monarchs, whose greatest good would seem to be the oppression and exploitation of their subjects, with unfaithful foreign politics in their wake. Moreover, the threat of reason of state – that is, the precedence that the private interest of the ruler takes over the public good – is present within the Dutch Republic itself, as de la Court suspects the house of Orange of monarchical ambition and sees therein a threat of slavery to the still-free Dutch citizens.

On de la Court’s understanding of *populare regering* (popular government) – where the rulers have sorted out ways of dealing with the fickleness and inconstancy of the people – this form of government is much preferable to a monarchy, in particular since a well-ordered popular
government promotes commerce and trade and thus the general well-being in ways that a monarchy can only dream of. De la Court further argues that a mixed constitution is not the way to order a popular government, precisely because by the ambition of those representing the monarchical element, a mixed constitution might easily be corrupted into a monarchy, since the former and the latter share an interest in war and conquest. While the young Grotius – in classical style – understood a distribution of sovereign powers over different offices to contribute to stability, de la Court strongly supported undivided sovereignty.4

Some ten years later, just after the election to office of the young prince of Orange, William III, Benedictus de Spinoza rehearsed de la Court’s Political Balance and explained in a systematic way the workings of necessity in politics. ‘Right equals might’ captures the nature of politics as much in monarchical as in non-monarchical rule, according to Spinoza.6 A comparison between the two therefore can no longer rely on a presumed untainted character of republican government, nor be argued for from the exceptional nature of the Dutch Republic.

For Spinoza human nature is everywhere the same and the issues, challenges, and limitations confronting the several forms of government differ by circumstances, not on principle.7 From Spinoza’s point of view, a monarchy is as good as any other form of government as long as it is well ordered. Spinoza makes quite clear that the tables of de la Court’s anti-monarchism can be easily turned against the republic itself. He points to the increasing oligarchy of the republic as the major cause of its demise in 1672, when French armies brought it to the verge of collapse.8 In addition, Spinoza argues, the intention in 1654 to abolish the position of the count as representative of the country without changing the fundamental laws9 had been as inconsequential as to try to end the English monarchy by executing its king.10 Spinoza agrees with de la Court that an ill-ordered monarchy is liable to be war-prone and consequently exact large levies from its population, but neatly adds that he himself is interested in well-ordered governments, monarchies as well as republics.11

In his Theologico-Political Treatise of a few years earlier, Spinoza explains that any ruler must consider the well-being of his people as more important than his promises to foreign nations. In the Political Treatise he amply argues that a well-ordered monarchy is the more absolute, the more it cares for the well-being of the people.12 The perfidy of monarchies in their behaviour abroad was brought home and integrated into his general understanding of politics, irrespective of the form of govern-
ment. Moreover, Spinoza considered monarchy to be a serious alternative to the Dutch Republic’s not so well-ordered aristocracy, praising monarchy’s greater rationality and capacity to involve its subjects in political deliberation.\textsuperscript{13}

Looking at the development of Dutch political thought from Grotius to Spinoza as the gradual incorporation of the reason of state of foreign tyrants into the analysis of the Dutch polity provides an explanatory context to the new interest-based theories of politics, such as Spinoza’s famous equivalence of right and might. This reason-of-state perspective is attractive because it helps us understand the nature of political argument after Spinoza.\textsuperscript{14} Bernard Mandeville eventually became one of the most noticeable of the bourgeois reason-of-state thinkers.

A corollary of this internalization of reason of state into Dutch political ideology is a sudden recognition of the value of monarchy. Grotius achieved something of the sort in his mature writings, in particular in \textit{De jure belli ac pacis}, which argues for the formal equivalence of all forms of government even while maintaining that some governments allow their subjects greater freedom than do others.\textsuperscript{15} And indeed, Grotius contributed to the later incorporation of reason of state by his theoretical reconsideration of punishment, resistance, and war.\textsuperscript{16} Moreover, the religious debates in the early Dutch Republic were at least as important to sorting out the new understanding of private and public in Dutch politics. In the gradual development of distinctions between a ‘public church’ and ‘private conscience,’ between a civil religion and the toleration of ‘private’ sects, the lines were drawn to formulate a new institutional understanding of politics and to present the \textit{res publica} in a new light. Here our modern concepts stand a bit in the way, as we would expect a bourgeois and commercial society to focus on rights to freedom, on individualism, and on liberal democracy. This present-day perspective, however, would lead us astray in studying the Dutch seventeenth century, which in its functioning heavily depended on social formations of all sorts: enterprises, cities, semi-public organizations like the East India Company (V.O.C.), water boards, and indeed, churches.

The nature of the discussion about monarchy among the outstanding theorists of the later seventeenth century – de la Court and Spinoza – therefore is predicated by institutional considerations and implies nothing less than the discovery of a new social ontology (Spinoza) and engagement in a discussion that resonates more with Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Adam Smith than with Locke or Hobbes.
The aim of this chapter is to sketch the articulation of monarchy in the political philosophy of Dutch republicanism. The naïve republicanism of the Revolt was gradually replaced by an inclusive and full-bodied institutional understanding of politics – by a sceptical republicanism – and by a new appreciation of monarchy in terms of what one anachronistically might call constitutional monarchy. My complete argument consists of the following sub-arguments: (1) There is a strand of Dutch political thought that I join with others in calling Dutch republicanism. Its principal authors are de la Court and Spinoza. (2) This Dutch republicanism differs from its contemporary namesakes in various senses. (3) Furthermore, this Dutch republicanism critically follows the government of the Dutch Republic and has other ideological aims than just defending the *regenten* incumbents in their conflicts with religious and Orangist opposition. It is critical for a particular reason: it claims recognition of the importance for the successes of the Dutch Republic of open access to political participation, in particular for first- and second-generation immigrants. Dutch republicanism is thus an ideology for immigrants, and for exiles (as I will argue below in more detail). (4) Spinoza depended extensively on de la Court in his gut feelings about politics. However, as a philosopher, Spinoza translated this into an ontology directed at sorting out the furniture of the world, based on this central formula: the *potentia multitudinis* which is the *potentia Dei*. I call this ontology a republican one because it highlights core features of its political variety, in particular, the notion of a *sui generis* organization of the body politic. (5) Consequently, the Dutch republican understanding of monarchy turns out to be republican as well, with its emphasis on constitutional monarchy as the only viable form of monarchy. Note that the logic and singularity of a *civitas* are different things, there are aristocracies and monarchies as there are women and men. A form of government thus contains a logic that helps us understand singular states. The logic of states is a sort of *notio communis*; it belongs to the parts as well as to the wholes, and permeates the laws that determine these states. To understand this or that state as the particular singularity it happens to be, against the background of the laws that determine it, opens the way to understand its *essentia*. Such an understanding gives us insight into the mind of the body politic – the institutions and laws of the civitas – although observers play an important role in articulating these. However, observers, or prophets for that matter, are not free-floating spirits but are emotionally and otherwise integrated into their own society. (6) The ideological targets of Spinoza are predicated upon his
general theory of human nature, and they are intended to present clear alternatives for policy decisions. Making monarchy a viable alternative for the Dutch Republic was Spinoza’s attempt to compel the Dutch ruling elite of his day to take the measures necessary to maintain their republic.

**Potentia Multitudinis**

No concept in Spinoza’s political philosophy has been as hotly debated as the *potentia multitudinis* – the power of the multitude or the power of the masses. The latter interpretation was introduced by Marxist philosophers in search of appropriate precursors for a Karl Marx in disrepute. Althusser scholars Étienne Balibar and André Tosel in particular have been very active in this respect, as has Antonio Negri, the Italian ideologue of the *Potere Operaio*, who recently further transformed Spinoza into the theoretician of the anti-globalist movement.¹⁷ These philosophers were attracted to Spinoza for his determinism and radical democratic convictions, as it seemed easy to recognize from his work a kind of historical-materialist determination underlying the power of the masses, eventually breaking through all suppression and exploitation. To argue such an interpretation, however, requires both some detailing and analysis of Spinoza’s philosophy.

Spinoza is an ontological monist, for whom the world is one single substance which has, however, two attributes for us: extension and thought. These attributes are two sides of the same coin, or as Spinoza himself puts it: the order and concatenation of ideas is the same as the order and concatenation of things.¹⁸ This ontological monism was decried as atheistic fatalism by his contemporaries and later critics; it is, however, not unlike the dominant vision in modern-day ontology. Modern philosophers also believe that the world is describable by the laws of physics and that what we regard as mental is a non-causal supervenience on this physical structure.¹⁹ This ontological monism manifests itself on various levels. Best known is Spinoza’s position that one cannot use reason to direct the passions or affects, but that the affects can only direct themselves. Different from the Christian position that we have to fight the flesh, Spinoza holds that the flesh is one way of looking at man, just as reason is.²⁰ For good reasons Spinoza therefore has to reconsider the true meaning of notions like superstition, reason, and freedom, as well as God’s providence for mankind.

Another central consequence is the posited equivalence of right and
might, of *jus* and *potentia*, in political life. In what seems just an obnoxious enlargement upon Hobbes, Spinoza maintains that not only in the state of nature does right equal might, but that this also holds for the political state. The difference, however, is much more radical in its consequences than one might think, since it leads to the corollary that the rights a state can exercise over its subjects will never exceed the power of the state’s body, that is, the multitude.

The Marxists consequently conclude that the power of the state is equivalent to the power of the multitude. Their opponents, however, charge them with unwarranted reification by considering the multitude as an individual in the ontological sense. In the view of such liberals, the multitude that makes up a state is not an integrated unity as an individual should be. They point out that, in practice, and according to Spinoza, it will never be the case that each and every member of this multitude is rational, and therefore, the multitude will suffer from internal conflict and thus fail to be an individual in the Spinozan sense.

These conflicting views find their rock bottom in the Spinozan notion of the individual and translate into respective interpretations as libertarianism, on the one hand, and revolutionary Marxism, on the other. I will show that Spinoza is nowhere near to being either of these two, which can easily be done by comparing Spinoza with de la Court in an argument from context. But before doing that I would like to reflect somewhat more on Spinoza’s ontological individual, in particular to distinguish it from the best-known image of the political individual in all of the history of political thought, Thomas Hobbes’s Leviathan. I myself long believed that Spinoza was a methodological individualist, one for whom the explanation and description of more complex structures flows – according to some laws of composition – from their elements. I no longer think this to be correct.

First, aggregation presupposes independent individuals to start with. Spinoza’s debunking of the modern politics of his time consisted precisely in demonstrating that the contract theory of politics failed to understand man as a particle of nature. Man is not his own master, according to Spinoza, and free will is an illusion. Man will carry along his natural determination even in the state. For Spinoza, contract theory is a dangerous ideology if taken too seriously.

Second, the essential thing for the *respublica* is to establish its relationship to God: not in the naïve sense of submitting to a contract with God, as the Jewish people did, nor in the idea of God’s chosen nation embraced by Dutch and other Calvinists from time to time; but rather in
the abstract sense of establishing a balance or harmony that is articulated (‘represented’ is Spinoza’s term) in the idea of that particular state, that is, its laws or accepted ideology. This ideology is not the property of one writer or some other single person, nor even of group of persons; rather, it is a conceptual structure or frame to which men in society relate in their capacity as actors in society. If this functions well, a state cannot disintegrate, unless it is prone to corruption.

Spinoza’s discussion of oligarchy in Dutch politics exhibits all of these elements. As he explains in the *Tractatus Politicus*, an aristocratic government requires a sufficiently large group of patricians because otherwise a growing incidence of factionalism and neglect of office will lead to suboptimal decision-making, and hence to a decay of the power of the republic and a subsequent fear of the masses among the rulers. Such a situation should be prevented by all means. Here de la Court and Spinoza agree wholeheartedly: foreigners who settle and contribute substantially to the well-being of the state should be given the opportunity to join the ruling classes. In a properly organized aristocracy it should be a rule that none of the inhabitants beyond the Patricians can possess landed property, so that they are as free as practically possible to vote with their feet and choose the exit option whenever the government’s policy is harmful to them. Neither a belief in hereditary predominance nor claims from patrician virtue should provide the elite’s motivation. Rather, elites should be aware that opening up the ruling classes is one of the most important parameters of a strong and powerful state.

This is not a republicanism that appeals to citizens’ virtue, nor the imposition of an identification with the public good to the detriment of the private, but rather a republicanism that creates the conditions for a strong and internally well-structured state by rulings and laws with which one could easily identify. It is an answer to the famous joke of Groucho Marx: ‘I don’t want to be a member of any club that would accept me as a member,’ because the Spinozan republican says: ‘this is the kind of club I would join, even if the rest of the members are as egoistic as I am myself, precisely because of the way it is organized.’

Thus, on the one hand, Spinoza has severed the relationship between the individual’s virtue and the virtue of the state; on the other, he has demonstrated that to assess the quality of a republic is to find out about its dominant legitimization and its consistency.

The *potentia multitudinis* is, therefore, not the power of just any multitude, but as Spinoza says in the *Tractatus Politicus* (III.2), it is about a multitude guided as if by one mind: ‘the right of the state or of the sov-
ereign is nothing more than the right of Nature itself and is determined by the power not of each individual but of a people which is guided as if by one mind.’

A multitude guided as if by one mind is ipso facto endowed with power. Commentators generally emphasize the veluti (as if) in this qualification and hastily add that this indicates the metaphorical character of the description. So in this vein the search is for the kind of thing that would embody this *una mente veluti* in politics. One easily assumes that Spinoza might be talking about the multitude being ‘of one mind,’ that is, agreeing among each other and therefore being rational.

If, however, one concentrates on the body politic (the multitude) and its mind, then one would take the mind to refer to the logic of the state’s organization, and to the idea of the state that represents its internal structure. Spinoza identifies this logic as the laws:

But, inasmuch as the supreme authority of this dominion rests with this council as a whole, not with every individual member of it (for otherwise it would be but the gathering of an undisciplined mob [*inordinatae multitudinis*]), it is, therefore, necessary that all the patricians be so bound by the laws as to form, as it were, one body governed by one mind. But the laws by themselves alone are weak and easily broken, when their vindicators are the very persons who are able to transgress them, and the only ones who are to take warning by the punishment, and must punish their colleagues in order by fear of the same punishment to restrain their own desire: for all this involves a great absurdity. And, therefore, means must be sought to preserve order in this supreme council and keep unbroken the constitution of the dominion, so that yet the greatest possible equality may exist between patricians.\(^\text{22}\)

Here, Spinoza is following up an analogy to an individual person’s self-awareness, his fears and hopes that connect the uncertainties of the world around him with the *potentia* of his own essence. The interesting thing about this analogy is that it seems to be a double analogy, finding its original in Machiavelli’s discussion of political stability: a state is secure if it stays firm on its original constitution *and* has acquired independence from external threats for that reason. To that purpose, Spinoza distinguishes the inordinate from the ordinate multitude, and identifies the latter with the proverbial ‘one body guided by one mind.’ In *Tractatus Politicus* (II.16) Spinoza speaks of *iura communia* and *ex communi consensu* in order to indicate the *una mente veluti* of
the state. In other words, the *potentia multitudinis* is effective if and only if the multitude is guided as if by one mind, that is, composes a viable state.  

**Pieter de la Court and Spinoza’s Rehabilitation of Monarchy**

Like Spinoza, de la Court was the son of an immigrant to the Dutch Republic. While Spinoza’s father was a merchant in Amsterdam, de la Court senior became an important cloth manufacturer in Leiden. The son Pieter, together with his brother Johan (who died before their first publication appeared) was a student in Leiden and made a Grand Tour of England, France, Geneva, and Germany in the early 1640s. He had been originally intent on becoming a minister, but his Grand Tour made de la Court change his mind, presumably because it inspired a religious relativism that would make him abhor religious dogma to the end of his life. De la Court integrated successfully into Dutch society, as had his father. Pieter’s sister was married to the Leiden professor of philosophy and first defender of Descartes, Adriaan Heereboord. Pieter himself received the humanist training at Leiden University that was standard among the intellectual elite. A typical upstart, he bought himself an estate outside Leiden and his son devoted himself to the art and theory of horticulture. In social terms the de la Courts were successful because they were rich and had a happy hand in arranging marriages. As a writer, Pieter de la Court was successful because he was attractive to readers of different political affiliations. His two most important books sold very well and in successive editions. The first, *Consideratien van Staat, ofte Politieke Weegschaal* (*Considerations of State or Political Balance*), first published in 1660, ran to five editions and was translated into German. The other, the *Interest of Holland*, had only two editions, of which the first of 1662 was immediately translated into German (1671), and the second of 1669 was translated in the early eighteenth century into both French (1709) and English (1702 and 1743). The *Interest of Holland*, however, would become the best-known of the translations. The books were published under the pen name of John de Witt, and must have been meant as instruction about the agenda of the United Provinces in international politics.

Pieter de la Court enjoyed demolishing the very idea of monarchy by way of a repertoire of arguments from the Tacitean tradition about the passionate character of politicians and of monarchs in particular. His main rhetorical strategy was to take the supposedly strong aspects of
monarchy (single-headed unity, virtuous king, military leader, and embodiment of justice) and reduce them to their opposites: He who wants to rule alone, depends more than anybody else on others; he who depends on virtue is the easiest to corrupt; kings fear the people and thus act irrationally. Monarchy is one big travesty of honour, dressing up what really is the exploitation of its subjects by courtiers and court favourites. This attack is forcefully elaborated in the *Political Balance*.

De la Court’s *Political Balance* is structured in three parts: on monarchies, on aristocracies, and on popular government. It presents an interesting bit of theory that is then illustrated by ancient and contemporary states. In the part on monarchy, de la Court performs two major feats: he gives a fundamental criticism of Hobbes;25 and, second, he sets up the arguments against monarchy that Spinoza would use to develop his constitutional theory of monarchy.

The discussion of aristocracy that follows in part two concentrates on the dangers of aristocratic arrogance and of aristocracy turning into monarchy (which for de la Court is in practice always tyranny of sorts). This latter danger can only be averted if the patricians in the aristocracy manage to prevent oligarchy by rotation of office, and to prevent the establishment of hereditary rule by open admission to the ruling ranks. Aristocratic rule is thus seen as a precarious balance between its innate tendencies towards monarchy and its lack of representation of the population at large.

The third part of the *Political Balance* is on popular government. Notice that de la Court did not call it ‘democracy,’ but translated the Greek word into its Dutch equivalent – *populare regering*, or popular government – which makes it modern and distances it from the traditional invectives against democracy as being unstable, capricious, and quarrelsome.

But if, by some accident, many adult men come together while none of them has a considerable party (At postquam exui aequalitas, & per modestia ac pudore, ambitio & vis incedebat, provenere dominationes. C. Tac.), then usually from that natural equality flows a mutual fear, modesty, and morality, since one is shameful and does not dare to desire that others suffer from us, what we would not like to suffer from others. Since in the meantime human indigence is great, and regulation necessary to get out of this misery and indigence, one easily, given the variety of opinions, allows it to be equitable, that reasonably the few – and therefore the weakest in knowledge and power – have to accept the judgement of the many in mat-
ters that pertain to the community and do not suffer delay. This natural equity and reasonableness is the foundation of all democracy or popular government.26

The basic example of this *populare regering* in antiquity is Athens, in particular in its successful war against Persia. The contemporary example for de la Court would seem to be the United Provinces, and the optimal form of government for de la Court an aristocratic government that comes as near as possible to popular government. The most important argument underlying that recommendation is that broad participation and popular satisfaction make better republics: ‘Because a reasonable self-love (“een reedelike eigen selfs liefde”) and the virtue of gratefulness flowing from that are to be considered the foundation of all human virtues (if there are any among men).’ The best rule is that which is the most integrated with the endeavours and actions of ordinary people. Monarchical rule is the worst form of government because its supposed advantage of a single-headed government to avoid dissen-sion and lack of political virtue, in practice turns into its disadvantage: the king will be manipulated by his courtiers and reduced to a bundle of lusts. In the meantime the courtiers take advantage of the situation. This is arbitrary government at its worst.

The best government, according to de la Court, is ‘where the well- and ill-being of the rulers depends on the well- and ill-being of the citizens,’ as is the case in a popular government. ‘Thence it is clear that all common citizens in a popular government all together, will more often decide to their own well-being, than the prudent and moderate Counsellors in an Aristocracy will decide to the advantage of the Commonwealth, where each will look after his own interest, even when it is to the detriment of the Commonwealth.’27 This will be achieved best in a republic where everybody can aspire to public office, and where political issues are discussed on a broad scale, although it is evident that the ordinary people will most of the time not really understand.

Moreover, one can see clearly that among men the desire of possessing many goods and means of subsistence is the first and most potent desire; moreover that this desire, once to some extent satisfied, is followed by the desire of honour, which is no less potent and doesn’t leave men but in the grave. (Erant quibus appetentior famae videretur: quando etiam sapienti-bus, cupidio gloriae, novissima exuitur. Verba sunt C. Taciti de nunquam satis laudato Helvidio Prisco. Hist. Lib 4.) Since these general passions of
ambitio and avaritia exceed all other human drives, it is no wonder that in all popular governments, where each believing himself capable can wish to attain government and office, an endless number of Citizens really prepare themselves to be capable for government. And since no one can pretend, neither for himself nor for his children, to any hereditary right of office, it has always to be founded on some particular excellent capacity, and no one can become negligent or slow without immediately experiencing the punishment of being passed over. Therefore it is no wonder that these two general and most potent passions of avaritia and ambitio, so strongly aroused in popular government, and in combination, herein bring about more eminent Heroes, wise Men, and virtuous people, than in any other form of government.28

Interestingly, de la Court put to further use the psychological exercise underlying this criticism, and one might suspect it went well with his compatriots who did not like Louis XIV in the first place. The logic of the interaction between political structure and enhanced and suppressed psychological characteristics among the political actors was played out again in the discussion of the other two forms of government: aristocracy and popular government. In sound aristocracies, ambition for office and desire for wealth stimulate the development of the bourgeois virtues of education, entrepreneurship, and competition. In sound popular governments, these bourgeois virtues are even further enhanced by public legitimization of the government’s policies, and even the population at large will start to participate in at least some of these values. De la Court is very much aware of the extent to which the absence of fear by and for the population at large is an important factor in the success of a republic. To publicly discuss policies helps to prevent fearful misgiving and suspicion from taking hold of the people and hence helps to prevent irate uprising or rebellion. But even in cases in which this is unsuccessful, de la Court is confident that the people will correct the rulers by their passionate revolt. All taken together:

It is clear that all Popular Governments that are known to us have developed out of their own power (unless devoured by a larger foreign violence, which threatens all governments alike) very large and mostly commercial cities, abundant in lawfully acquired riches, and in all arts, sciences and virtues; to wit, Sidon, Tyre, Athens, Syracuse, Rhodos, Chios, Venice, &c. Moreover, all those other republics that have in the past enriched and
enlarged themselves by plunder and war and thus acquired fame, would not have been able to do so without their Aristocratic Government being mixed with Popular Government, like Sparta, Carthage, Rome. It is clear in all cases that very small cities and villages are destroyed by the smallest war, while on the contrary all large cities, that are essentially their own master, cannot be conquered unless by exceptional protracted and heavy warfare. And plundered and burnt down, these large cities shortly after resurface as is seen more than once with Tyre, Sidon, Athens, Rome, Liège, &c.  

The two-pronged structure of de la Court’s argument – criticizing monarchy and constructing popular government on the same theory of human nature – makes Spinoza’s rehabilitation of monarchy only a logical consequence. If existing monarchies were really as tyrannical and counterproductive as de la Court argues, they would not continue to survive (except in the totally degraded form of the Turkish Empire; see the Preface of the *Theologico-Political Treatise*). Even the Spanish Empire is not a total failure, notwithstanding the Inquisition (which is against the principles of monarchy: it should be religiously tolerant). Spain is governed by councils and is hence a constitutional monarchy. Spinoza and de la Court agree on this one principle, that the rational choice is to choose the lesser evil or the greater good. As de la Court says:

Because as nothing among our human actions and affairs is so good and useful, that it does not in some respect contain evil and uselessness, and also nothing so evil and useless that it does not contain in some respect some good and use, all Moral Demonstration, prudence and wisdom consists in this, considering the good with the good, and the evil with the evil, as well as the good with the evil and the evil with the good, to choose, or reject, not that which is absolutely good, or evil, but that in which is the most good, or the least evil. Thus it is very clear in Political Affairs that one couldn’t find a single person, and even less likely a human large society without defects, and that one, in calling the best that which has the least defects, we should in this evil world also call good all those imperfections and defects in a government which prevent other greater imperfections and defects.

And therefore I add, that it is evident that in all other forms of government the inhabitants are burdened with many more inconveniences than is the case in Popular Government, and on the contrary they nowhere enjoy so much freedom to further their own and their family’s well-being. Therefore the Popular State should be called absolutely the best.
Spinoza, however, would add that there is in reality no such choice between forms of government, and that in politics we are talking rather about choices of omission. By not realizing the requirements of a particular form of government, it will necessarily decay and at one moment or another fall apart, as then only fortune will decide over such governments. In the actual process of history there is no choice between forms of government, but citizens can have reasons to accept the joint understanding of the conditions of survival of the state they live in. Then we will be able to say that their state ‘cannot disintegrate or be changed into any other form by any internal cause.’\textsuperscript{31}

The New Social Ontology

Spinoza expressly derives his politics from the philosophical principles in his \textit{Ethics}.\textsuperscript{32} Nevertheless, Spinoza considers political practice rather than philosophical dogma the surest way to good politics.\textsuperscript{33} From the first of these points we must establish an appropriate and politically defensible interpretation of Spinoza’s philosophy; from the second it apparently follows that we need a contextual interpretation of his political thought. We will address these two issues in the following way. First, an analysis of Spinoza’s philosophical conception of self-preservation and identity will help us understand how Spinoza’s philosophy itself is imbued with the values of republicanism, and estimate the problems inherent in this philosophical republicanism. Second, tracing the context of this republicanism in the writings of Spinoza’s contemporaries will facilitate understanding of the connection between philosophy and ideology in this radical contribution to the understanding of the \textit{res publica} and to political philosophy in general.

Political Identity and the Identity of the State

In a fundamental sense, Spinoza took Machiavelli’s remark in the \textit{Discorsi} seriously. We have to consider politics as we consider the phenomena of nature, because otherwise we cannot make sense of history: ‘as if heaven, the sun, the elements, and men should have changed the order of their motions and power, from what they were anciently.’\textsuperscript{34} The first question in politics is – in the phrase of Quine – ‘on what there is,’ and the answer for Spinoza was as for Machiavelli: order, motions, and power.

Spinoza, however, needed more words to elaborate that position than
Machiavelli used in the introduction to his Discorsi. Spinoza wrote a whole book on the topic, since the Ethica is fundamentally an ontological exercise, directed at a principled understanding of the ‘furniture of the world.’ Unlike Machiavelli, Spinoza profited from the new mechanical world-view as expounded by the new philosophers and their attempts to bring modern natural science to bear on the basic philosophical issues. Descartes struggled with how to characterize ontologically the bodies that were the subject of Galileo’s laws; he used extension, as the most general category of bodies, as well as motion, and thereby was able to consider the world as ‘matter in motion,’ to use Hobbes’s felicitous phrase. Like Descartes, Spinoza desired to develop a coherent and parsimonious ontology based on the physicists’ concept of matter. Spinoza aimed at a definition of what there is that, on the one hand, is complete – does not leave things out – and, on the other hand, can discriminate – permit us to differentiate between things in a coherent way. Hobbes would argue that things are different according to how they appear to us. He dropped the enterprise of finding out about the furniture of the world in favour of the epistemological one of how in practice we do distinguish.

One Single Proportion of Motion and Rest

Spinoza wrote to Oldenbourgh that ‘indeed, all bodies are surrounded by others and determined by each other to exist and operate according to a certain and fixed proportion, maintaining always in all together, i.e., in the whole of the universe, one single proportion of motion and rest.’ As he explains in the Physical Digression in Part II of the Ethica: ‘Bodies are distinguished from one another by reason of motion and rest, speed and slowness, and not by reason of substance.’ This ontology has some important characteristics. First, in order to make it feasible at all, Spinoza claims that bodies are typically composed of other individuals that form clusters of motion and rest by communicating these among themselves. The identity of a body, or individual – according to the Ethica (II.A3” and II.Lemma4) – is determined by the ratio of motion and rest that characterizes this body. This ratio is not constant in an absolute sense, because all bodies are caused to exist by other bodies, and will cease to exist because of external causes. But in so far as a conglomerate of bodies composing one body with a certain ratio of motion and rest exists, it must be considered to be an individual. Spinoza draws a further conclusion from this ‘certain ratio’ by claiming
that whatever is produced or caused by this individual will necessarily contribute to its preservation. Or, in the philosophical terms that have become famous: every *individual* has a conatus – a drive to act – and this conatus acts towards self-preservation. Consequently, *individuals* bring about – through their actions – the reproduction of their own existence. In other words, the ‘self’ in self-preservation, according to Spinoza, is the certain ratio of motion and rest, which is the cause of the agency of the *individual*. This applies to all bodies – stones, fleas, humans, and societies. The *facies totius universi*, the totality of bodies, this infinite sequence of causes and effects, is a collection of individuals that exist in time.\[^{38}\]

However adaptive, individuals, being characterized by a fixed proportion of motion and rest, should adhere to their original form in order to continue to exist; otherwise they die, or change their character so much that we must conclude that they are no longer the same individual.\[^{39}\] It is a matter of theory to determine the conditions of individuality.

Individuation has been the topic of heated discussion among Spinoza scholars for the past three decades.\[^{40}\] Spinoza’s Physical Digression in Part II of the *Ethica* is set between postulates 13 and 14 on the human mind. It thus serves a function in the understanding of the human mind. Wolfgang Bartuchat has argued that since adequate knowledge is the explanation from the first cause, that is, God, we must understand essences independent from actual existence. An individual, however, is finite and ‘in time,’ and thus that individual’s conatus is this niche-dependent strife for self-preservation which is acting. Like all functioning (operari) this is the outcome of proximate causes; unlike any other functioning the individual’s acting is free as far as it expresses the essence of the individual.\[^{41}\]

Bartuchat claims that for Spinoza the human mind is an essential element in his argument because ‘it proves what the ontology presupposes but cannot prove, i.e., that there is an independent existing thing ... The universal perspective that every existing thing is determined by the Absolute changes into the particular human perspective that asks: under what specific conditions does the Absolute exist for man?’\[^{42}\] Consequently, says Bartuchat, Spinoza develops a theory of knowledge and a theory of action which leads famously to the intellectual love of God and the immortality of the mind. It is rational man who understands that to be free is to be rational and to act out of the essence of one’s being, which establishes the determination of man’s essence by the Absolute. The function of these elaborations, and that is Bartuchat’s point, is to
solve the riddle of Spinoza’s ontology: the logical distance between the finite modes and the infinite attributes of God.

In analogy to Bartuchat’s analysis of the developmental structure of the Ethica, I argue that Spinoza can be understood to follow a similar procedure for the body politic. Spinoza’s conclusion of the discussion of aristocracy in the Tractatus Politicus, that under certain circumstances the aristocratic form of government can be a respublica aeterna, should be understood in precisely this sense. If the laws of an actual, existing republic agree with certain principles, this republic can be understood (can understand itself) to be eternal, that is, as acting out of its own essence. Also, the famous formula that ‘right equals might’ must be understood in this light. First a few more words on the second panel of the triptych: the context of Spinoza’s republicanism.

Republican Context

A classical way to explain – and thereby to understand – republican ideology is to see it as a reaction to monarchy. It might not always have been feasible to adorn republican ideology with the arrogance of superiority in a world that, though not rejecting republics in principle, definitely regarded the status that royal lineage provided as endlessly superior to that of bourgeois rulers, no matter how rich. It is even an essential ideology for the incumbents of a republican regime who need justifications where the blue of royal blood is absent.

The anti-monarchical stance is apparent only. Recent studies on republicanism emphasize the complicated ways in which republican arguments have expressed the ideological needs of parties involved in local politics. The general message of these studies is that historians have too easily found the presence of classical republicanism or civic humanism in early modern political thought, and overlooked the local origins of ideologies that only superficially may have taken their inspiration from classical or Renaissance models.

The history of the war against the Spanish oppressor provided a large part of this local justification in the form of the black legend of Spanish atrocities and Dutch heroism, to be complemented with the age-old historical justification from Tacitus’s Germania and Dutch liberty.

In the Political Balance, de la Court writes that ‘aristocratic government may be very well represented by the human body, of which the complete corpus, arms and legs, flesh and bones, is prudently ruled, and receives life, food, and motion by way of the brains, the heart, liver,
lungs, stomach, spleen, kidneys etc., as representing the eminent inhabitants, from whom the whole well-being of the body depends.\textsuperscript{44} The simile was neither new nor very original,\textsuperscript{45} except for its emphasis on the contribution of all the parts to the well functioning of the body politic. For de la Court these metaphors are images, and part of his florid and rhetorical style. From the simile of the body he easily moves to a fable or \textit{emblema} to illustrate his point further. Another example of this political imagery was borrowed from Tacitus: ‘since the state has but one body, it should be ruled by only one mind.’\textsuperscript{46} This would seem parallel to Spinoza’s repeated reference to the basic requirement of any form of government that the state should be ‘as it were, a single body directed by a single mind.’\textsuperscript{47} We can point out now, however, that crucial distinctions exist between de la Court and Spinoza, even while for Spinoza the acutissimus V.H. (Van den Hove = de la Court) was the fountain of many political examples, facts, and insights. Spinoza’s ‘republican ontology’ transforms important republican insights of de la Court into a general theory of social organization, a naturalist theory for sure, emphasizing (conditions for) stability and the socializing effect of institutions on citizens. The ironic consequences of a reliance on princely virtues that de la Court so profusely illustrated reappears in Spinoza’s determinist social universe as the principle of man being a particle of nature and the deduction from there that ‘citizens are made, not born.’

Application of these principles to monarchy, however, shows how far de la Court was led astray by his zeal as an anti-Orangist republican partisan of John de Witt. For what reason? To understand that let us return to the \textit{potentia multitudinis}.

\textit{Conatus and the Power of the Multitude}

Alexandre Matheron argues that ‘every political society, then, has two causes: a democratic \textit{conatus} that, all things being equal, would flow onto an institutionalized democracy, and external causes that modify this \textit{conatus} by sometimes giving it non-democratic affections. Now, since right is identical to fact, every causal explanation is at the same time a \textit{juridical legitimation}.’\textsuperscript{48} Bartuchat, however, follows Lee Rice\textsuperscript{49} in maintaining that the body politic can only be considered to have a \textit{conatus} as far as the individual \textit{conatus} of its citizens have been united, a unity that Bartuchat denies. The state is an as-if individual, since ‘the unity of the mental cannot be explained from the mind, since it cannot take recourse from the self-understanding of the individual men, who are
Bartuchat contrasts the contingent and fortuitous stability of the state with the real and positive *concordia* between individuals who agree among themselves. The rationality of a state for Bartuchat is rather *Statsklugheit* – reason of state – directed at the manipulation of the affective desires of men. And even where agreement is reached this is never a ‘free agreement ... [men in the state] agree not out of their own self-understanding, but with a view to a communality that remains external to themselves.’ In other words, from the ontological argument that aims to prove the existence of things by way of establishing human essence, Bartuchat leaps to the conclusion that other essences have to be constructed on its basis. It cannot be denied that a *potentia multitudinis* that is blind and unreflective does not fulfil the ontological requirements of an individual. Consequently, Bartuchat contends that the three forms of government are of equal value for Spinoza. Sylvain Zac seems to take the side of Bartuchat, where he remarks that the government is ‘chargée de la réalisation, selon la diversité des situations sociales et historiques, des conditions les plus favorables à la conservation et au développement des *conatus*.’ Evidently, Zac refers here to the conatus of individual men to profit from the care of the government. Education and health care – the *salus populi* in a doubtful Spinozan presentation – seem to be envisaged, and thus states can be judged according to this criterion. Zac is here more generous than Bartuchat, for whom the government cannot do anything to further the freedom of man. Barbone and Rice take a more restricted position: ‘Spinoza’s conception of right seems to be limited only to individuals and would not include group ‘rights’ such as “women’s rights,” “gay rights,” etc.’

The point here is that Matheron limits the conatus to the multitude, and libertarians limit the conatus to individual men. We have, however, established in two separate steps that for Spinoza the state – as distinct from both the individual citizen and the multitude – itself has a conatus. The first step was the ontological one, showing that a stable republic (*respublica aeterna*) is an individual. The second step was by pointing out the underlying motivations of the Dutch republicans to promote a strong republic by liberating the energies of its citizens by way of an appropriate political organization.

**Monarchy**

The failure of the Dutch Republic to rid itself of the Orange stadholders, that is, the ineffectiveness of the Eternal Edict of 1654 and the failure of the *regenten* to ward off the events of 1672, were major and
dramatic events in Spinoza’s lifetime. Applying his theory of conatus to politics, Spinoza set out to come to grips with these unsettling developments. He demonstrated that the institutional republicanism of de la Court should not be limited to republics only, and could be fruitfully applied to other forms of government.

Spinoza’s republican ontology, even while it partly took its lead from the writings of de la Court, allowed him to insist on the reality of Orangism in the Dutch Republic. A monarchy, provided it be well ordered, does not preclude liberty nor the well being of the people, if only it is understood that for a state to be guided una mente veluti it has to have the proper institutions that cohere with its conatus. That is, the laws should reflect and support the conditions for the state’s reproduction, by promoting appropriate policies, enhancing the people’s well-being, and in general identifying the sense of unity that supports the coherent working of the body politic. Contrary to what de la Court believed, successful monarchs in the republic will never be tyrants. The success of a monarch is precisely to allow the joint operation of the political institutions to articulate sound policies and bring about legitimate government. Indeed, for Spinoza monarchy is viable only if it incorporates the kind of democratic elements that de la Court strongly supported. Spinoza has thereby separated himself from the staunch anti-Orangism of his fellow-republicans de la Court and De Witt, just as later Spinozans would support William III, if only because he fought tyrannical monarchs like James II and Louis XIV. Nonetheless, it would be farfetched to conclude that Spinoza started a new perspective on monarchy in his time. The radical Enlightenment was anti-monarchical, most importantly because it took root in absolutist France. However, Bernard Mandeville and Montesquieu share their admiration of the constitutional monarchy in England after the Glorious Revolution, and definitely prefer it to the Dutch regenten republic of which Spinoza so unrelentingly had shown the shortcomings. The three of them underpinned their preference with a detailed institutional analysis of the burgeoning modern state. But only Spinoza wanted to connect this new understanding of politics with a philosophical theory of the state’s conatus. My suggestion is that this connection is what made the modern theory possible.

Notes

1 Parallelon rerumppublicarum liber tertius: De moribus ingenioque populorum Atheniensium, Romanorum, Batavorum, ed. by J. Meerman (Haarlem 1801–3).
Hans Blom

Grotius (1583–1645) created the manuscript while still a teenager, and then put it aside as the product of youthful enthusiasm.

2 In *De antiquitate reipublicae Batavicae* (1610), which arguably formed a part of the *Parallelon*, Grotius rehearsed his aristocratic republicanism, by presenting Batavia as a *respublica perennis*, concluding the book with: ‘It is now our duty, if we do not want to be ungrateful or imprudent, firmly to defend this form of government, which is urged by reason, approved by experience, and recommended by antiquity.’ Hugo Grotius, *The Antiquity of the Batavian Republic*, ed. and trans. by Jan Waszink et al. (Assen 2000), 115.

3 Pieter de la Court, *Consideratien van Staat, ofte Politieke Weegschaal*, 4th ed. [Hereafter *PB (Political Balance).*] (Amsterdam 1662), 664.

4 Pieter de la Court, *PB*, 403.


7 Spinoza, *Tractatus Politicus (TP)* (Amsterdam 1677), e.g. I.7. English translations follow Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, ed. by R.H.M. Elwes (London 1883). Cf. VII.27: ‘But, as we said, all have the same nature.’

8 *TP*, VIII.44.

9 Ibid. IX.14. In 1654, the Eternal Edict excluded the House of Orange from the stadholderate and the office of captain-general.

10 *TTP* XVIII (Shirley, 277–8).

11 *TP* VIII.31.

12 I.a. *TPVI*.11: ‘And thus he [i.e., the king] will then be most independent, and most in possession of dominion, when he most consults the general welfare of the multitude.’

13 In modern parlance, we see here Spinoza as a philosopher of ‘difference’ and the importance of the ‘Other.’

14 See Hans W. Blom, ‘The Republic’s Nation: The Transformation of Civic Virtue in the Dutch Eighteenth Century,’ in Paschalis M. Kitromilides, ed., *From Republican Polity to National Community: Reconsiderations of Enlightenment Political Thought* (Oxford 2003), 19–39. Spinoza gives the topic pride of place in *TPI*.2, where he speaks of ‘divines, who believe that supreme authorities should handle public affairs in accordance with the same rules of piety, as bind a private individual.’

15 *De jure belli ac pacis* (Paris 1625), Liii.8.


Spinoza, *Ethica more geometrico demonstrata* (*Ethica*), IIP2S: ‘the order, or connection, of things is one, whether nature is conceived under this attribute or that.’ From *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. I, trans. by Edwin Curley (Princeton 1985), 494.

See the ample discussion in *Studia Spinozana* 14 (1998): *Spinoza on Mind and Body.*


For a recent presentation of this debate, see Steven Barbone, ‘What Counts as an Individual for Spinoza?’, in Olli Koistinen and John Biro, eds., *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes* (Oxford 2002), 89–112.

TPVIII.19.


Court over de politieke betekenis van burgers,’ in Joost Kloek and Karin Tilman, eds., Burger: Een geschiedenis van het begrip burger in de Nederlanden van de Middeleeuwen tot de 21ste eeuw (Amsterdam 2002), 99–112.

25 De la Court, PB III.2: ‘But on the contrary everybody knows how unfeigned one loves oneself, and how truly one is disposed to use one’s knowledge and power to the advantage of one’s own self. Moreover, it is true, that men by nature have such a great presumption of their own capacities, that they will never willingly and knowingly transfer unconditionally the competence to take care of their own advantage to whomever else. Consequently, it seems evident that these two forms of government in which such an unconditional right to rule over the other inhabitants is established – to wit, Monarchy and Aristocracy – originate from pure force and fraud, which cannot be justified and legitimized, but by the lapse of time’ (my translation). See also Alexandre Matheron, ‘The Theoretical Function of Democracy in Spinoza and Hobbes,’ in Warren Montag and Ted Stolze, eds., The New Spinoza (Minneapolis 1997), 207–16, and Spinoza, TP VIII.12.

26 De la Court, PB III.3 (my translation).

27 Ibid. III.5.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid. III.6.

30 Ibid.

31 TP, X.10. Note that libertarians refuse to translate aeterna respublica otherwise than as ‘a state that will be lasting,’ because they believe that the state cannot be viewed sub specie aeternitatis, which I think to have demonstrated to be misguided.

32 See Spinoza, TP II.1.

33 TP I.2 and I.3: ‘For human nature is such that men cannot live without some common code of law, and such codes have been instituted and public affairs conducted by men of considerable intelligence, both astute and cunning. So it is hardly credible that we can conceive anything of possible benefit to the community that opportunity or change has not already suggested and that men engaged in public affairs and concerned with their own security have not already discovered.’

34 ‘Come se il cielo, il sole, li elementi, li uomini, fussino variati di moto, di ordine e di potenza, da quello che gli erono antiquamente’ (Discorsi I, introd.). Compare Spinoza (TP I.4): ‘So I have considered human emotions such as love, hatred ... not as vices of human nature but as properties pertaining to it in the same way as heat, cold, storm, thunder, and such pertain to the nature of the atmosphere.’ Compare Ethica III, Prefatio: ‘nothing in nature happens which can be attributed to any defect in it, for nature is
always the same, and its virtue and power of acting are everywhere one and
the same, i.e., the laws and rules of nature, according to which all things hap-
pen, and change from one form to another, are always and everywhere the
same.’

35 *Leviathan* I.4: ‘and all such names are the names of the accidents and prop-
ties by which one matter and body is distinguished from another.’

36 20 Nov. 1665 *Epistolae* (Ep.) 32.

37 *Ethica* II, Lemma 1.

if we should now conceive of another [Individual], composed of a number
of Individuals of a different nature, we shall find that it can be affected in a
great many other ways, and still preserve its nature ... if we should further
conceive a third kind of Individual, composed of this second kind, we shall
find that it can be affected in many other ways, without any change in its
form. And if we proceed in this way to infinity, we shall easily conceive that
the whole of nature is one Individual, whose parts, i.e. all bodies, vary in infi-
nite ways, without any change of the whole Individual.’

39 See *Ethica* IV, P39S.

40 See Lee C. Rice, ‘Spinoza on Individuation,’ in E. Freeman and M. Mandel-
baum, eds., *Spinoza: Essays in Interpretation* (La Salle 1975), 195–214; and
more recently, Don Garret, ‘Spinoza’s Theory of Metaphysical Individua-
tion,’ in Kenneth F. Barber and Jorge J.E. Garcia, eds., *Individuation and
Identity in Early Modern Philosophy* (Albany 1994), 73–101. See Aaron V. Gar-

chs. 2 and 6.

42 Ibid. 62 (my translation).

43 Steve Pincus, ‘Neither Machiavellian Moment nor Possessive Individualism:
Commercial Society and the Defenders of the English Commonwealth,’
sissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections* (Cambridge 2000); Sean
Kelsey, *Inventing a Republic: The Political Culture of the English Commonwealth,
1649–1653* (Stanford 1997); Paul Anthony Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Mod-
ern* (Chapel Hill 1994). See also: Barbara Weinmann, *Eine andere Bürgergesell-
schaft: Klassischer Republikanismus und Kommunalismus im Kanton Zürich im
späten 18. und 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen 2002); James G. Wilson, *The Impe-
rerial Republic: A Structural History of American Constitutionalism from the Colonial
Era to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot 2002).

44 *PB*, 359.


46 PB, 33.
47 TP VIII.19: ‘ut unum veluti corpus, quod una regitur mente.’
50 Bartuchat, Spinozas Theorie, 271.
51 Ibid., 273.
52 I would be tempted to consider this a Kantian ‘Fehldeutung’ of Spinoza on Bartuchat’s part. It demonstrates an unwillingness to take the multiplicity of subjectivity seriously. The republican heritage is a useful way of demonstrating this multiplicity.
54 According to Jonathan Israel, ‘Spinoza allows that monarchy is redeemable up to a point. But this is only where and when it can be made substantially to approximate to democracy – and hence to share in democracy’s strengths and advantages. In indicating how this should be done, he so utterly emasculates government by kings that what survives is little more than a caricature. The perfect monarchy, he suggests (doubtless tongue in check), is constitutional monarchy.’ Monarchy, Orangism, and Republicanism in the Later Dutch Golden Age (Amsterdam 2004), 8.
chapter two

‘Absolute, Not Arbitrary, Power’: Monarchism and Politics in the Thought of the Huguenots and Pierre Bayle

LUISA SIMONUTTI

Idolators of Royal Authority

In the writings of the Catholic controversialists, and by certain voices on the Huguenot side, the French Protestants were defined as ‘Idolâtres de l’Authorité Royale (Idolators of royal authority).’ Over the course of French history and in particular from the religious wars of the sixteenth century up to the second generation of refugees, the Protestant subjects of the French Crown had, as a political position, adopted the doctrine of the absolute divine right of kings, considering it to be the political model taught by the Old and New Testament texts.

In one of the numerous sixteenth-century letters Au Roy – to the King – the Protestants declare: ‘They are persuaded that after that which they owe to God, they are obliged to render obedience without limits to Your Majesty. They do not know of any man on earth who can dispense them from the fidelity owed to You. To fear God and honor Your Majesty, and employ in their service their goods and their own lives: that is an inviolable maxim among them that they take care to inculcate in their children.’

To the eyes of generations of the Reformed, the manifest military virtues and the political loyalty which the Huguenot subjects revealed towards the Crown ought to have guaranteed them the freedom to serve God according to their consciences. This position was one of the chief principles of Huguenot political thought, along with the sixteenth-century monarchomach texts and those who favoured principles of mitigated absolutism.

Equally impressive was the anti-Huguenot pamphleteering literature which, among various positions, attributed to the French kings not so
much a project for religious pacification of the country through the promulgation of the various edicts, but a project of rendering the Huguenots obedient and compliant by means of such edicts. Effectively, as Camillo Capilupi put it in *Lo stratagema di Carlo IX, Re di Francia contro gli Ugonotti rebelli di Dio et suoi*, the King of France had won many battles on the open field against the Huguenots, but they multiplied like a Hydra head and it was not possible to extinguish them. Profound thinking and prudent counsel suggested the promulgation of edicts that would quiet the Huguenots and allow him to retake control little by little, instead of having the country in constant revolt.

These various lines of thought were expressed through an extensive literature which, since these pages are devoted principally to the political debate that developed in the seventeenth century, must necessarily remain in the background, only faintly traced out. However, such strands of thought did not fail to evoke renewed interest in the course of the seventeenth century. There was in particular a flourishing of the voices of those who took inspiration from the sixteenth-century monar-chomach texts and the supporters of a moderate absolutism and the dual pact with God and the sovereign. Even in the century of the Sun King, this was a largely pamphleteering literature which, with the progressive restriction of Huguenot political representation and religious liberty, had rediscovered the vigour of the years of the religious wars.

Even in an emblematic text such as the *Avertissement aux Protestans des Provinces* (1684), penned by a Huguenot hand and written to explain the reasons for the rising of the Reformed of the Dauphiné in defence of religious liberty, the author asks himself: ‘But one has never seen them armed against their princes and they have never wanted to defend their worship by force of arms: they have left that maxim to the pagans, the Muslims, and the false church of the Arians. And why have they acted like that? Because they have made it a point of inviolable conscience to never defend themselves against their Sovereigns, no matter how unjust and cruel they were.’ This was a profession of loyalty to the Crown forcefully repeated by the Huguenots at the time of Cromwell’s revolution to mark out their distance from their English cousins, who had tainted themselves with regicide. Effectively, in the controversy with the Catholics, the Huguenots were accused of sharing the ideas of the ‘revolutionary’ Reformed beyond the English Channel or, still worse, of plotting to transform the Kingdom of France into a republic. ‘The Catholics,’ continues the author of the *Avertissement*, ‘become more heated and say that the Huguenots amply prove that which they have always been
accused of, that heresy in dogma is always accompanied by disobedience to princes and authorities." The author of the Avertissement aux Protestans emphasizes, on the contrary, the loyalty of the Huguenots to the Crown; just as the fathers had been, so were the sons, who, over the course of the 1680s had suffered the pressure of the dragonnades, exile, and the religious and civil restorations to the Catholics. All the Huguenots asked, for themselves and for all Christians, was liberty of conscience: ‘You say that we disobey the King, which is true, to our great regret, but why does the King order us to do things that are against the obedience that we owe to our God?’ They turned back against the Catholics and the clergy the accusation of being the true followers of Machiavelli.

On the one hand, the courtiers, and on the other, the Jesuits and the Catholic entourage of the Sun King exhorted the sovereign to give proof of his absolute will by dissolving the pact with the Huguenot subjects drawn up by his predecessors, plunging the country once again into discord and civil war. Again, it is the author of the Avertissement aux Protestans who writes in the pages devoted to the Apologie: ‘The ministers and courtiers on one side, and the Jesuits on the other, after studying their Machiavelli well, tell the prince that he is not obliged to keep the word which his ancestors gave, even less with regard to heretics, and even much less with regard to rebellious heretics [the Huguenots].’

**Loyalty without Exception and without Reserve**

The Roman Catholics, on their part, replied to their Protestant brothers, and more specifically to the zealous polemicist Pierre Jurieu, by the authoritative hand of the Catholic author Antoine Arnauld. In the Apologie pour les catholiques, Arnauld rejects the accusations of Jurieu, claiming that the latter’s sole purpose was to render Catholics suspect in the eyes of all the princes of Europe. According to Arnauld, the presumption of the Huguenot zealot had no limits since he claimed to provide arguments as invincible as geometrical proofs of the fact that Catholics were ‘the plague and corruption of all of Europe, and even of all the world.’

Jurieu maintains that, in their kingdoms, Huguenot princes could not exert the same tolerance towards Catholics as Catholic princes showed to Huguenots, because the Catholic subjects had sworn loyalty to a prince whom they considered the king of kings. This supreme sovereign, their God, effectively rules that a prince who falls into heresy must be despoiled of all rights to sovereignty and obedience and that, conse-
quentlly, it is legitimate to reject his laws and consider him an enemy up to the point of accepting his assassination.\textsuperscript{12} At the end of his arguments, Jurieu feels authorized to assert that ‘The King has more to gain from saving his Huguenot subjects than all the others, because they are the only party of whose loyalty he can be perfectly sure.’\textsuperscript{13} Therefore, concludes Jurieu, the princes should tolerate and trust solely the Huguenot subjects who ‘swear loyalty without exception and without reserve.’\textsuperscript{14}

Arnauld protests the loyalty of the Catholics, drawing on texts by the Fathers of the Church, the testimony of the early Christians, and the current vicissitudes of the English Crown. In the packed pages of the Apologie pour les catholiques Arnauld replies to Jurieu’s writing chapter and verse, spelling out his bitter arguments against the Huguenots, commenting ironically upon their supposed disinterest in worldly goods and events and on their loyalty to the Crown.

The Catholic thinker derides the supposed submission to the king protested by the Huguenots which, to his eyes, appeared to be anything but ‘without exception and without reserve.’\textsuperscript{15} On the contrary, argues Arnauld, from the very origins of the sect the Reformed had always had at the tips of their tongues a very significant proviso to their loyalty, that is, the condition that the king should not command them to act counter to their conscience and religion.\textsuperscript{16} Arnauld reproves Jurieu and the British Calvinist writers, foremost among them George Buchanan, for having written their works to ‘sanctify these popular seditions, proving things by taking the Scripture against its natural sense, like when the Devil alleges against Our Lord that there is nothing legitimate and holy about Him.’

Arnauld goes on to examine the definitions, which the De Jure Magistratuum by Theodore de Bézè and the Vindiciae contra Tyrannos – in particular the latter work – provided of the figure of the tyrant, effectively using the term to describe only worthy kings who were entirely lacking in the characteristics of the tyrant.\textsuperscript{17} He subjects to severe criticism the supposed political foundation of the Huguenots’ loyalty to the Crown. In truth, according to the Catholic thinker, the basis for such loyalty is to be found solely in the defence of the interests of the Protestant religion ‘and not for the motive of the obedience and loyalty that they owe their King.’\textsuperscript{18} To Arnauld’s mind, only Catholics are truly loyal to the king as king, even before he was converted to Catholicism. The reference is clearly to Henry IV and the political events which accompanied the promulgation of the Edict of Nantes.
In an almost unanimous chorus, the French Reformed recognized in royal power the form of government which was better adapted than any other to protect the existence of the Huguenot subjects and the legality of the Protestant religion. Right up to the 1690s only weak and scattered voices were raised to claim a republican regime for the French people, a position from which the major Huguenot writers distanced themselves, judging it a fount of disorder, revolt, and social rebellion. They were, on the other hand, accused by the most prominent Catholic writers, and among them Arnauld, of wishing to create a new state within the state of France, of being used to this end by the rebel nobility, and finally, of taking inspiration from the Dutch model. But the arguments of Huguenot monarchism held firm, and in 1650 Moyse Amyrault, in a work significantly entitled Discours de la Souveraineté des Roys, evoked the teachings of Bodin against the supporters of popular sovereignty.

In the France of the late Renaissance and the seventeenth century absolute monarchy did not ineluctably signify restriction or impoverishment of the private sphere. On the contrary, it was considered the form of government which best guaranteed the public weal, social peace, and the safety of the borders.

If there was a criticism which echoed through the Protestant ranks, this was levied against Papism and the arbitrary and tyrannical power supporting it. Consequently, it was not royal power in itself which was responsible for massacre and oppression, but rather the absolute power which accompanied the Catholic religion. In the course of the 1680s the anonymous author of the pamphlet Methode dont on se sert aujourd’hui pour introduire en Angleterre le Papisme et le Pouvoir Absolu, in the face of the threatened Catholic succession to the English throne, writes: ‘By the same rule, which can break one law and break another, he could change the succession, raise taxes, and make himself absolute like the King of France, who does whatever he pleases.’ The writer continues with a further reflection, arguing that the repression of the Protestant religion goes hand in hand with the affirmation of the most exaggerated absolutism: ‘The first point is that the Protestant religion and civil liberty live and die together like Gemini twins.’ Even in liberal England, ‘No one doubts that England is a free nation and that her liberty is only assured by positive and express laws’ – as a writer later translated into French spoke of his homeland – sovereign power had to be constantly protected against the appetites and abuses of certain sovereigns and, at times, opposition to such despots was an act of justice.
With eyes turned to England, an intensive polemic continued on the Continent. Since the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 and especially during the brief reign of James II, French Catholics had hoped to find support for their absolutist policy. They had even hoped possibly to sanction the union of the two kingdoms through the marriage of Mary, daughter of James II. But she married William III of Orange, whose landing in England in 1688, albeit peaceful, was viewed by the French Catholics as a veritable catastrophe.

Arnauld, figuratively, took to the field in defence of his religion. Having doffed the robes of the theologian, he took up his pen to compose a brief essay with the emblematic title: *Le véritable portrait de Guillaume Henry de Nassau, nouvel Absalon, nouvel Hérode, nouveau Cromwel, nouveau Néron.* This was a violent reprimand directed at William III who, according to Arnauld, in his inhumane ambition had, like Absalom, taken up arms against King David, his father; and who, like Herod, had attempted to kill the infant future King of the Jews. Arnauld went on to declare him illegitimate in the same way in which William and the conspirators attempted to discredit the descendants of James II: ‘The King of England is a monster of inhumanity and a cruel tyrant by ambition: a damnable usurper, a violator of all of the most sacred rights, a Nero of which the ancient Nero was only a modest image.’

In the eyes of Arnauld, William of Orange was another Cromwell, who had overthrown the legitimate king, accusing him of philo-Papism and of governing in a despotic and arbitrary manner, and who, after having taken his place, himself became a ‘veritable tyrant.’ Like his supposed historical predecessor, so the new Cromwell had taken advantage of the support of the army to perform an act of usurpation and to intimidate the magistrates and those who did not adhere to his policy. Finally, William of Orange was another Nero who cruelly attacked Catholics, accusing them of betrayal when they alone had remained loyal to the legitimate king, just as the Roman Emperor had cast the blame for the burning of Rome on the Christians, while he himself was the incendiary.

This last point, that is, ‘the loyalty that subjects owe to their princes’ had been, as we have seen, defended at length by Arnauld in his previous essay *Apologie pour les catholiques*, written in reply to *La politique du clergé de France* by Pierre Jurieu, to the extent of becoming a fundamental part of the work.

Arnauld confesses that he was struck by the ferocity with which the Huguenot zealot had hurled himself against Catholics in the attempt to persuade the king that he could not count on their loyalty and could
only count on the Huguenots. Following this, Arnauld dedicates the first part of his *Apologie*, on the one hand, to an examination of the question of the sovereignty of the king and a definition of the laws which would give greater stability to the Crown and convince the subjects that nothing in the world could release them from the loyalty which they owed to their sovereign and, on the other, to confirm that the worst books against the sovereignty of Kings, the most culpable of promoting uprisings of subjects, were those of the Protestants.  

The task that Arnauld set himself, therefore, was to expose the wicked design of the writer, that is, Jurieu, who missed no opportunity for damaging the Catholics, setting them in a bad light in the eyes of all the princes of Europe, maintaining not only that they had in no way submitted to the king for reasons of conscience but that they nourished within themselves a ‘predisposition to revolt.’

**Pierre Bayle: Absolute, Not Arbitrary, Power**

Bayle did not write a treatise on political philosophy. He was, nevertheless, a writer as prolific as he was unsystematic, who frequently disseminated his own convictions in the pages of his *Dictionaire*. The entries in the *Dictionaire*, and particularly the notes, became the ideal place in which not only to disseminate his own political ideas, but above all to subject the political ideas of past or contemporary writers to attentive critical examination. In these pages, and also in the *Avis aux Refugiez* and in the *Commentaire philosophique*, Bayle insistently points out the key to the correct interpretation of his defence of absolute power and questions himself about ‘just ideas of diverse degrees of despotism.’ From the impossibility of man being able to reach a certain knowledge of principles, whether these be religious, epistemological, or civil, there stems the necessity, especially in the sphere of politics, to choose the option which guarantees the greatest solidity for the state, social peace, and the liberty of individual conscience. Nor were theoretical obstacles lacking to the definition of his project of a universal tolerance founded on moral concepts, whether sceptical or rational.

In the pages of the *Commentaire philosophique*, Bayle was fully aware of the difficulty of delineating a concept of universal tolerance which, beyond the confessional connotations, was still unable to base itself on either reason or morals. He therefore had to trust to a political practice and to a legislator which should have the authority and power to guarantee the preservation of the peace of the state. It was consequently in
the terrain of the insurmountable fallibility of human reason, in sceptical reasoning, that Pierre Bayle’s theory of religious toleration had its roots.

In the *Dissertation* on Junius Brutus, author of the *Vindiciae contra tyrannos*, and in the entries in the *Dictionaire* to which it refers, Bayle emphasizes the problematic nature of the political question regarding the legitimacy of opposition to tyranny, the need to safeguard loyalty to the Crown, and the political transparency of certain of the most prominent figures in the Huguenot political panorama such as Philippe Duplessis-Mornay. Finally, he acquits the French Protestants of the charge of sedition.29

Bayle underlines the fact that the case for the rights of peoples has so many good arguments and plausible reasons that it is not surprising that it has been upheld not only by the seditious and by dissidents, but also by ‘many people of great judgment and exemplary virtue’.30 Among the latter Bayle numbers the author of the essay *De la Servitude volontaire*, Etienne de la Boetie. What Bayle complains of is that several of those who wrote in defence of the people, once they were put under pressure by historical or personal events, then became supporters of arbitrary power. The entries in the *Dictionaire* offer the discursive and rhetorical formula for expounding the epistemological motivations which limit the authority of the criterion of evidence in the spheres of metaphysics, the natural sciences, and religion.

Not even religion can guarantee the possession of the truth, and so even he who in the eyes of another has fallen into error must enjoy the same rights as he who is convinced of possessing the truth. For Bayle, the roots and the guarantee of the rights of conscience are to be found in the awareness that the human soul is pervaded by an ‘invincible ignorance’ which urges it to choose what appears to be true, but the nucleus of which is beyond its knowledge. This is true even in religion.

The solid foundation of Bayle’s theory of toleration, therefore, is to be found in the invincible nature of human ignorance. While from the point of view of moral theory the argument of ‘invincible ignorance’ and ‘errant conscience’ is open to debate, especially in Bayle’s reflections regarding the justification of those who, even in good faith, adopt the role of persecutor of the rights of the human conscience, in the field of politics Bayle’s argument in favour of toleration offers a solid bulwark for the defence of the absolute state against every form of political and religious sedition.

In the *Commentaire philosophique*, Bayle claims that in the establish-
ment of a society based on the social contract no man abdicated to the sovereign rights over the individual conscience.\(^{31}\) In the second part of the work, reflecting on the thorny question of whether we owe obedience to God or to men, Bayle reiterates the conviction that ‘sovereigns cannot now make of their religion a political law, and oblige their subjects to it upon penalty of being guilty of sedition and felony.’\(^{32}\) Under the entry Geldenhaur in the Dictionaire, he states: ‘One does not mean by that to take the right of the sword from princess, which they have from God; one only wants to say that that right does not extend to errors of conscience, and that sovereigns have not received from God the power to persecute religions. That is the true state of the question.’\(^{33}\) Bayle, therefore, maps out the limitations of this absolute power so that it cannot degenerate into despotism or tyranny.

In the Lettre d’un refugié françois à un nouveau converti, written in Amsterdam in 1688, Bayle expresses himself in favour of the lawfulness of taking up arms to defend liberty of conscience against a despot: ‘Concerning subjects who are oppressed for their religion taking up arms, with no intention to do violence to anybody but only to procure an honest liberty to follow the light of their conscience, disposed to be loyal to their sovereign in all other matters, I have known very able and very pious people in this country who have said it is licit, and that we should be ashamed of what our Fathers have said in this regard.’\(^{34}\)

This is a crucial passage in the political reflection of Bayle regarding the political organization of a state, marking a distancing from the question of the religious uniformity of a state and moving towards more of a lay solution to the problem of the plurality of religions within a territory and of the relationship between religion and civil society.\(^{35}\)

In the Avis aux refugies Bayle places emphasis on two ‘highly dangerous diseases’ which could infect France, seditious and defamatory books ‘and the other a certain republican spirit that wants no less than to introduce anarchy into the world, the worst blight on civil society.’\(^{36}\) Having affirmed liberty of conscience for each individual, Bayle clarifies the difference between a republic and an absolute monarchy. As we can see in the modern republics such as Venice and Holland, he continues, the difference does not consist in the fact that the people are allowed a greater disobedience in a republic than in a monarchy, but merely in the fact that the power of the monarchies resides in a single individual, while in republics ‘a certain agreement of citizens’ is called for. Bayle concludes with: ‘there is no individual under these two different sorts of government that is not equally destitute of any right of contradiction ...
and who does not merit equally the vigor of the laws if he resists that power.'

If every individual has the right to disobey a violent prince – contends the philosopher – we would fall into that confusion which is worse than tyranny itself, and we would entrust ourselves to the judgment of a thousand tyrants on the pretext of driving out one. The condemnation of the coercion of consciences as a horrible and unacceptable act, despite certain inconsistencies within Bayle’s work, remains a central tenet for the philosopher.

In the Commentaire and in the pages of the Dictionnaire Bayle proves himself anxious to provide a political model which can guarantee social peace, using universal toleration as its instrument, for the purpose of avoiding the rebellions and seditions inevitably provoked by the political and religious sectarianism which was increasing by the day. Nevertheless, particularly in the polemical writings which he composed in the years following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes and during the Refuge, Bayle was concerned to reassure his reader of the loyalty to the Crown of every single Huguenot, whether he were still in France or whether he had chosen the path of exile.

A loyalty to be openly manifested, the immediate shunning of all ambiguity, these were the primary concerns of all Huguenots under the Sun King, as we see from Bayle’s review of the work of Elie Merlat in the pages of the Nouvelles de la Republique des Lettres: ‘One should not suspect the author of this book of giving unlimited power to kings for interested reasons, since he was banished from France for religion ... Thus it is the force of belief that makes him speak, and obliges him to fortify his brothers in a truth that he regards as of the last importance.’ This was undoubtedly a rooted political conviction, but also a political manifesto essential to rendering credible the hope of being one day readmitted to his homeland by his king.

**Elie Merlat: The King as God**

Urged by the succession of events, Elie Merlat completed his analysis of the absolute power of sovereigns and published his Traité du pouvoir absolu des souverains pour servir d'instruction, de consolation et d'apologie aux Eglises Reformées de France qui sont affligées. After condemning every form of republic, he declares that sovereigns enjoy an absolute and unlimited power against which their subjects cannot oppose resistance for any reason, either religious or civil, on pain of committing sin. Merlat then pro-
poses to demonstrate the veracity of his thesis through the evidence of the sacred texts.

The political subjection of the human race, and the necessity to delegate the guidance of society to the absolute power of the magistrates and the prince, is the result of the fall of mankind into sin. In this condition of loss of the divine image, men have mislaid their original innocence and with it their liberty and equality, and have fallen prey to the passions and to reciprocal oppression. While legitimizing the absolute power of the sovereign, Merlat admits the existence of a liberty of conscience, at least interior. But at the same time, he reminds the king’s subjects of their duty of obedience and loyalty to the Crown, even in the case of extreme tyranny. Effectively, true religion cannot be defended through seditious actions, since it does not fall within the sphere of temporal power or that of the sovereign, but belongs to human consciences. It is only God, the sole magistrate of kings and princes, who may eventually punish their crimes or oust the tyrants from power. Merlat, moreover, acknowledges as the source of his reflections and his theory of absolute power, not only the Holy Scriptures, but also the thought of Hobbes. He diverges radically from the latter, however, on the question of morals and, most importantly, on the role played by grace in redeeming man from the condition of sin.\(^{41}\)

In his work, Merlat attributes the persecution of the Reformed to a personal choice on the part of Louis XIV and his policies in relation to the Papacy and the Gallican clergy, since there could be no motive related to domestic policy or to social order, given the proven loyalty of the Huguenots to the laws of the state. Like other writers of his faith, therefore, it is not on the basis of the elaboration of an originally tolerant concept that Merlat requests the maintenance of the Edict of Nantes, but only in terms of restoring a fundamental law of the French state which had never been called into question in such a way as to justify the persecutions and the Revocation.

Yet again the words of Bayle can emblematically delineate the position which, leaving aside consideration of the important current of political thought of the monarchomachs, distinguished the vast majority of Huguenot thinkers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, whether they were famous writers or the anonymous authors of brief essays, letters addressed to the King, or pamphlets. The doctrine of the absolute power of kings ‘is very common among the Protestants, as is clear from the infinite number of books that they have composed against the Court of Rome.’\(^{42}\)
Monarchy was sovereignty in the hands of a single king, but not arbitrary or tyrannical: ‘It is thus that the Grand Turk himself is subject to the law, although that does not in the least limit his absolute authority – This shows how to refute those who suppose that an absolute government is not subject to any sort of law. They do not have just ideas of the diverse degrees of despotism.’

Notes

1 *Au Roy*, no place, no date, pages not numbered.

2 Ibid.

3 Camillo Capilupi, *Lo stratagema di Carlo IX, Re di Francia contro gli Ugonotti rebelli di Dio et suoi* (Geneva 1574).

4 A significant body of critical literature has been devoted to the study of Huguenot political thought of the sixteenth century. Among the innumerable and pertinent contributions, I restrict myself to referring to the sources and the bibliography found in Arlette Jouanna et al., *Histoire et Dictionnaire des guerres de religions* (Bouquins 1990).


8 *Avertissement aux Protestans des Provinces*, 36.

9 Ibid., 51.
Ibid., 60.


12 This passage from Pierre Jurieu, *La politique du clergé de France*, 133, is cited in A. Arnauld, *Apologie pour les catholiques*, 15: ‘Le Princes Protestans ne peuvent estre assurez de la fidelité de leurs sujets Catholiques, a cause qu’ils ont fait serment de fidelité à un autre prince qu’ils considerent comme plus grand que tous les Rois, qui obliges les peuples à croire qu’un Souverain tombé dans l’heresie est dechu de tous les droits de Souveraineté, qu’on ne luy doit aucune obeïssance qu’on peut impunément se reveler contre luy, qu’on luy peut courir sus comme à un ennemi du nom Chrestien, jusqu’à l’assassiner.’


14 Ibid.

15 Arnauld writes: ‘Il (Jurieu) a beau vanter leur pretenduë fidelité: il n’ignore pas qu’elle ne va pas jusques là, et bien loin quelle soit *sans exception et sans reserve* (comme il assure étourdiment sans prendre gardre à ce qu’il dit) tout le monde sçait, qu’ils avoient toujours cette modification en la bouche dés le commencements de leur secte: *Pourvu que le Roy ne nous force point en nos consciences*, et qu’ils l’ont même inserée dans leur confession de foy en ces termes: *Moiennant que l’Empire souverain de Dieu dimore en son entier.*’ Ibid., 24.

16 Ibid., 28.

17 Ibid., 44.

18 Ibid., 91–2.


20 S.l., s.d. (Knuttel collection), 1.

21 Ibid., 5.


24 Ibid., 4–5.

26 Ibid., 2.


30 Pierre Bayle, *Dictionaire historique et critique* (Rotterdam 1697), vol. 4, 576.


32 Ibid., 237.

33 Bayle, *Dictionaire*, voce *Geldenhaus*.


35 In one of his last works, the *Réponse aux Questions d’un Provincial*, in *Oeuvres Diverses*, vol. 3, 1013a, Bayle wrote: ‘Vous verrez par là que si une sage Tolérance de diverses Religions fait quelquefois la tranquillité, et la
prospérité d’un pays, la Religion n’en est point la cause; puis qu’au contraire il a fallu sacrifier à la Politique l’un des articles de la Confession de foi.’

37 Ibid., 595.
38 Ibid., 605.
I have known men of intelligence who are astonished that in kingdoms where the authority of the Prince is almost boundless, the instructors of youth are permitted to use the works of the ancient Greeks and Romans in which anti-monarchical theories abound, and where there are many examples of the love of liberty. But this is no more surprising than to see that republican states permit professors of law to lecture on codes and digests which presuppose the supreme and inviolable authority of an Emperor.¹

Bayle, *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* (1702), Hobbes Remark C.

Men are commonly induced to place the son of their late monarch on the throne and suppose him to inherit his father’s authority. The presumed consent of the father, the imitation of the succession to private families, the interest which the state has in chusing the person who is most powerful and has the most numerous followers; all these reasons lead men to prefer the son of their late monarch to almost any other person.²

Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature* (1748)

It is natural for students of government to praise the institutions of their own society, even when they criticize their rulers. American students of the American Revolution, for example, learn that the monarchy of George III was a tyrannical form of government, rightly rejected by the revolutionaries and rightly replaced by the Republic of the Founding Fathers. Historians in every age, from classical times to the present day, warn that such dichotomies will always be with us and must be treated with caution. The poet Alexander Pope, a contemporary of both Bayle and Hume, wryly exclaimed:
For forms of government let fools contest
What e’er is best administered is best.³

With equal relevance to the age in which the institution of public religion was taken for granted even though its confession or mode of faith might vary, he added:

For modes of faith let graceless zealots fight
His can’t be wrong whose life is in the right.⁴

Bayle, commenting upon Hobbes’s translation of Thucydides, reflects on the fineness of the line between patriotic rhetoric and academic judgment.⁵ Was it not common to praise the republicanism of one’s own society for its love of liberty and to condemn the monarchy of one’s neighbour for its autocracy? And was it any less common, should one live under a king, to praise monarchy when one enjoyed peaceful and civilizing institutions, and to attribute to ‘republicanism’ the tumult, faction, and conspiracies of neighbouring societies?⁶

The first purpose of this essay is to say something about the sceptical approach to monarchical theory of the French thinker Pierre Bayle and of the British thinker David Hume, and to show how they considered historical theories about the institutions of government. Was one theory of government preferable to another, and more likely to promote the well-being of the people? Or how, in light of Europe’s heritage of sceptical thought, should a critical historian assess theories of government in general, and monarchical theories of government in particular? A secondary purpose is to ask how each philosopher understood the term ‘absolute monarchy.’ The following section briefly examines the backgrounds of the two thinkers and the sense in which they were part of a movement of scepticism. Then some definitions of scepticism are proposed. The third section of this chapter identifies some notions of monarchy to which the arguments of Bayle and Hume were applied. In the two sections after that we shall examine some texts from each writer in turn. The final section presents some conclusions, in particular about the actual usage, in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century context, of the term ‘absolutism.’

Backgrounds

Any study of monarchies and monarchism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is a complex activity. We confirm the complexity when
we compare the ideas on the topic of French philosopher Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) with those of the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–1776). Both followed the sceptical mode in philosophy, and both applied critical argument to the received constitutional ideas of their age. Yet, though their theoretical criticisms were written from a sceptical perspective, their views about the public policy of their times were not so much sceptical as pragmatic. Taking a long-term view of the history of political institutions, both Bayle and Hume were committed to the promotion of an Enlightened society, and both sought through the discussion of new ideas to free society from dogmatic thought and promote Enlightened endeavour. Bayle was raised as a Huguenot subject of Louis XIV, though he became a refugee in the Dutch Republic. Hume was a Scot who sought to explain the overthrow of the dynasty of the Catholic Stuarts in England and Scotland and its replacement, not by an elected republic, but by another dynasty of monarchs.

These two sceptical thinkers are of interest to today’s students of government because they contributed to the method as well as to the substance of the subject. Each considers that the dichotomy between monarchy and republic is an idea that can be studied, but each shows that no indubitably true conclusions can be reached about any necessary relationships between theoretical forms of government and practical political outcomes. Bayle criticizes the regime of Louis XIV for, inter alia, revoking the Edict of Nantes. But, unlike certain Huguenots in exile, he argues not for the overthrow of the monarchy but for new laws that would reinstate and extend religious liberty everywhere.

Hume, writing more than half a century later, supports religious freedom from the standpoint of the enduring British opposition to a Catholic monarch. He defends, in 1752, the British preference for the dynasty of the Protestant Hanoverians who had replaced the Catholic Stuarts in 1714. Between the lines we can read that both sought new laws concerning freedom of thought, supposing that whatever the institution of government, civil law everywhere should have primacy over religious or canon law. Bayle insists on putting before the public his view that a hypothetical society of atheists would in the ancient world have been no less viable than a society of pagans.

Both Bayle and Hume have long been acknowledged for their contribution to philosophical thought and in particular to the sceptical critique of religious dogma. Their recognition as political thinkers is more recent. For the few disposed to grasp it, Bayle made his theoretical case for political pluralism in his *Pensées diverses sur la comète*, published
in 1681,\textsuperscript{13} and in extensive footnotes to his \textit{Historical and Critical Dictionary}.\textsuperscript{14} Hume, who studied in France, admired the ideas and tone of these works. Each consciously retrieved the critical methodology of the ancients, and both agreed with Pierre Gassendi and the moderns that a philosopher’s ideas should proceed from clear and distinct premises. Both sought to free the study of natural philosophy from the weight of theological and metaphysical thought.\textsuperscript{15}

With regard to constitutions, both Bayle and Hume supposed, as did Aristotle, that good government could proceed under either a monarchy or a republic. A ruler must keep the peace, enact good laws, and implement them effectively. Hume finds it of practical use to enquire whether the arts, the sciences, and civilized living are more likely to flourish under a monarchy or a republic.\textsuperscript{16} Bayle finds such an exercise to be less useful than intellectually provocative. Lessons for the youth of an era could undoubtedly be drawn from the history of Greece and Rome, just as they could be drawn from the history of modern Europe, but the overall lesson is that sometimes no indisputably true conclusions could be drawn at all.\textsuperscript{17}

\section*{Scepticism Applied to Theories of Government}

The word ‘sceptical’ can be understood in many different ways. If a politician says, ‘I am sceptical about foreign intervention,’ he or she is telling the audience indirectly that he or she is not going to support foreign intervention. In epistemology the word ‘scepticism’ is used mainly in opposition to the word ‘dogmatism.’ A dogmatic author invokes the authority of an institution or code of rules, while a sceptical or philosophical author relies on the authority of reasoned argument, and is reluctant to pass judgment in matters where judgment may be suspended.

To assess Hume’s sceptical understanding of constitutional monarchy, we should, as James Moor observes, distinguish between ‘contractual, patriarchal, providential, puritanical, patriotic and sceptical images.’\textsuperscript{18} In this chapter we show that Pierre Bayle’s identification of a range of political images that he found in history anticipated the approach of Hume. Bayle, writing before Hume, adopts an equally sceptical analysis when he assesses these theories.

We turn now to three key characteristics of sceptical analysis available to a historical critic, and we show how Bayle and Hume reflect these qualities in their approaches to theories of monarchy and monarchisms. First, a sceptical historian might seek to question the validity of any the-
ory of government advanced by a rival. A theory of government in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries might be republican or monarchical, just as theories of monarchy might be providential, contractual, patriarchal, puritanical, patriotic, or sceptical. Each theory would entail a sub-theory about political obligation: about the duties of government to enforce the law, the duties of the subject or citizen to obey, and when a subject or citizen might be absolved from obeying the law. In the age that followed the breakdown of Catholic Christendom, the first writers to be called sceptical were those rationalist thinkers who sought to refute the providential metaphor of government which asserted that Divine Providence placed monarch, Church, and citizen in their respective roles and willed public events. In the age of Bayle and Hume, to refute the providential theory was something of a sport among Europe’s lay intellectuals, though not, of course, among clerics and those who adhered to clerical teaching.

Second, a sceptical thinker questions not just the validity of a theory, but also the good faith of those who advance it. To return to the providential metaphor, many humanists from the time of Machiavelli have alleged bad faith and superstition on the part of Catholic theorists who advanced the providential metaphor. Clerical apologists, they claim, seek to consolidate their own authority or even to line their pockets, when they base their case for obedience to clerical authority on notions of God’s supposed intervention in a society’s affairs.

Third, after criticizing a rival theory, a sceptical historian should advance an alternative theory to put in place of the one just demolished. Some alternative theories would, if advanced dogmatically, call into question the reality of an author’s scepticism. John Locke, for example, is highly sceptical about Robert Filmer’s theory of patriarchy. He is not, however, equally sceptical about the theory of contract that he advances as an alternative. Hume, who sees little validity in either patriarchal theory or contract theory, remains a sceptical thinker because he makes no dogmatic claims for the truth of his alternative theory. He merely asserts that his preferred account of support for monarchy as a natural phenomenon is plausible. Bayle seems to take scepticism about theories of government further still. Some theories, he shows, including providential theory, can be completely refuted, while others, including the theory that one form of government brings more public good than another, are unproven. Bayle himself, in his role as a sceptical philosopher, offers no alternative theory at all. The reader is permitted to suppose that he has suspended judgment on the matter.
Posterity has largely failed to grasp the nature of Bayle’s scepticism about theories of political institutions. Some scholars praise Bayle for his support of religious pluralism and intellectual freedom. Others condemn him for his refusal to link his advocacy of pluralism to a preference for republican, as opposed to monarchical, institutions. Bayle is consistent in that, in his theoretical writings and pamphlets, he firmly refuses to be drawn into a commitment to violence. In 1688, he urges fellow Huguenots, both in the United Provinces and in France, not to take up arms against the government of Louis XIV, still less to do so in the name of republicanism, but rather, to pursue their aims (for the restoration of toleration in France) through negotiation. In short, as both sceptical historian and as community leader, Bayle maintains that the theoretical claims of monarchy versus republic are irrelevant to the question of political obligation and urges others to think likewise.

Behind Bayle’s refusal lies a pragmatic or commonsensical approach to public decision-making that is characteristic of the French politique. First, Bayle asserts that there is no necessary relationship between the form of a government and wise decision-making in public affairs. Louis XIV’s monarchical regime had formerly accorded tolerance to the Huguenots. Subsequently it revoked that tolerance, but it could restore it. Second, as a counsel of both morality and prudence, as relevant today as then, Bayle urges that no party, his Huguenot co-religionists included, should advocate a war which would cause suffering to the innocent or which would be unable to attain its stated end.

We turn next to some of the classical suppositions about forms of government which were widely debated by the elites of the age.

**Classical Theories of Monarchy**

*Monarchy as Rule by One Person in his Own Interests*

Given that the elites of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were schooled in the classics, they were closely attuned to the political ideas of Greece and Rome. They were aware that, according to Aristotle’s six-fold classification, a government could be that of the one, the few, or the many, with each form divided into two sub-categories according to whether rule was in the interest of the ruler or the ruled. Accordingly, the first sub-category (representing the positive side of the coin) yielded monarchy, aristocracy, and polity, while the second (representing its negative side), yielded tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy. Kingmakers,
in the early modern period, expected more of their prince than had Aristotle. Three expectations were paramount: the prince must maintain public order and rule in the interests of all; he or she must produce heirs and found a stable dynasty; finally, he or she must support and be supported by a public religion.

Monarchy as Rule by One Person in the Interests of All

If monarchy, according to one definition, was a form of rule distinguishable from aristocracy and polity, it could also be understood as a moral notion. A monarchy could be ruled in the interests of the monarch or in the interests of society as a whole. A ruling authority who ruled in the interests of all was to be praised, of course – but who was to make the assessment? In his article on ‘Hobbes,’ Pierre Bayle observes that in the ancient world both monarchy and republic were reciprocally misrepresented by their enemies. Republics were condemned as the more likely source of instability and violent disorder. Chaos of this sort, the ancients taught, was in the interests of no one. It was assumed that chaos occurred when a dictatorship collapsed or when a weak regime was undermined by faction and could no longer sustain even a minimal degree of order.

Monarchy as Power Transferred by Inheritance

Roman history, in contrast to the history of Greece, supplied posterity with a twofold distinction between republic and empire. Defined by the elective character of the Roman Republic (509 BC–31 BC) and the hereditary character of the Roman Empire (BC 31–AD 476), the distinction was of considerable interest to students of government in the age of monarchy. For, according to the classical historians, the justification of empire (understood as government transferred by succession) was its presumed stability. If power was transferred routinely to the ruler’s heir, there was less risk of violent conflict among contenders for office. As we shall see, Bayle was to question the truth of this generalization, while Hume would make use of it.

Bayle’s Critique of Authors Who Praise a Government for Its Form

The breakdown of Catholic Christendom in Europe, the ensuing Wars of Religion, and various peace treaties gave rise not just to Protestant
states, but also to a new network of sovereign states linked by diplomacy. The new order consolidated by the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 was perceived as a bulwark against both the return of former Catholic Christendom and a renewal of the Wars of Religion. Scholars were emboldened to recover the theory of the sovereignty of states and to deny any necessary relevance to the public good of either monarchy or republic, or of any particular religious confession – provided it was Catholic, Calvinist, or Lutheran.

An epigram at the beginning of this chapter cites a passage from Bayle’s article on Hobbes in which he mocks both the English philosopher and other institutional polemicists. Hobbes, observes Bayle, had once attempted through his translation of Thucydides to persuade his compatriots that disorder and confusion follow from the republican form of government. Hobbes could never have succeeded, since the supporter of the republic – committed already to his anti-monarchical position – would ask why the revolutionaries of the ancient world had been ready to take such risks: ‘For how did it happen, one will ask, that the Greeks and the Romans preferred exposure to such abominations, than to live under a monarchy? Did it not come about because of the deplorable conditions to which their tyrants had reduced them? And must monarchy not have seemed an evil very severe, very unbearable, and highly disgraceful, if they were willing to pay so high a price to deliver themselves from it?’

Echoing Aristotle, and foreshadowing Hume, Bayle notes that different circumstances produce different forms of government. Yet, the wise commentator praises the regime – whatever its form – that keeps the peace and rules in the interests of the ruled. If Aristotle’s model teaches that a monarchy, or a republic, or a mixed regime might preside with equal moral competence, it also teaches that no form of government is immune from transmutation into a corrupt version of its former self. Bayle’s embedded message is that the would-be political scientists of his age, in seeking to postulate a necessary relationship between the form of a government and the quality of a government, are demonstrably pursuing a lost cause.

In the entry on ‘Bourgogne’ in his Dictionnaire, Bayle makes a similarly sceptical observation about the supposed consequences of the hereditary transfer of power. The reign of Charles VI (1380–1422) of France, he notes, represents the ‘weak aspect of monarchical government.’ It is true that other forms of government also have their weak aspects, but they are not, ‘as are kings, susceptible to infancy or decrepi-
tude.’ Bayle points out that the failings of Charles VI, the hereditary prince, precipitated ‘the darkest and most turbulent dissention’ in France. This breakdown had many other causes, as well, he asserts, for the conditions – in which there was not only no authority, but also no locus of power from which authoritative leadership might arise – exacerbated the disorder. Nor, Bayle continues, could one have concluded, as many had, that the institution of a mixed monarchy would have remedied the disorder. For, he reminds us, France during those troubles had ‘many assemblies of notables,’ and it is evident that in those conditions an Estates General would have ‘exacerbated the troubles,’ not remedied them:24 ‘Such is the human condition that we are not permitted to choose between what is virtuous and what is base but between what is bad and what is worse; and it happens very often that one chooses what is worse when one thinks one is choosing (merely) what is bad.’25

Some may suppose that the texts we cite here demonstrate that Bayle was a pessimist about human nature and, in consequence, a supporter of absolute government.26 However, Bayle’s observations can be read, and I think should be read, as illustrative of his sceptical method. Bayle seeks to expose the manner in which clever propagandists, since the beginning of written histories, have drawn on the past selectively to support the point of view of the moment. It is not necessarily the case that hereditary monarchy, or mixed government, will remedy disorder in society. Endemic violence and instability may be engendered by causes that run far deeper than the form of government. Humankind often compounds its difficulties by a failure of rational thought and by believing too readily in the clichés of the learned.

Next, we consider how Hume, without overlooking the weaknesses of hereditary monarchy, defends the institution to support the status quo of the Hanoverian succession in Britain.

**Hume’s Naturalistic Account of Monarchy**

In seeking to account for the institution of government in general, and for hereditary monarchy as the ‘most common’ form of government, David Hume proposes some disarmingly weak arguments. In his *Treatise on Human Nature* (1748) he observes that ‘men are commonly induced to place the son of their late monarch on the throne and suppose him to inherit his father’s authority.’27 Thus, it follows that ‘the presumed consent of the father, the imitation of the succession to private families, the interest, which the state has in chusing the person, who is most powerful,
and has the most numerous followers; all these reasons lead men to prefer the son of their late monarch to any other person’ (Treatise, 559).

Hume is not interested in ridiculing Filmer’s divine right theory, and he is not persuaded by Locke’s alternative theory of a social contract. Rather, he argues, as does Machiavelli, that humankind is apt to base its institutions on imagination, so that even an act of chance, or conquest, is characteristically transformed into a tradition. In his influential essay entitled, ‘Of the Protestant Succession’ (1752), Hume deploys the naturalistic psychology that he had already developed to defend the Hanoverian Protestant dynasty against the Catholic Stuart dynasty. How, he asks, ‘could stability be preserved in any monarchical government, (which though perhaps not the best is, and always has been, the most common of any) unless men had so passionate a regard for the true heir of their royal family; and even though he be weak in understanding, or infirm in years, gave him so sensible a preference above persons the most accomplished in shining talents, or celebrated for great achievements?’

Perhaps here Hume has Bayle’s entry on ‘Bourgogne’ in mind (see above), but whatever his intention, his language would be so offensive to the ‘true heir of the royal family’ that we must suppose that Hume is referring to the concept generally. As with the theorists of absolute sovereignty, Hume assumes that the first purpose of government is to secure society from ‘convulsions,’ and that the risk of such disorder is greater if there is uncertainty over accession to the supreme office. He asks rhetorically: ‘Would not every popular leader put in his claim at every vacancy, or even without any vacancy; and the kingdom become the theatre of perpetual wars and convulsions? The condition of the Roman empire was not in this respect much to be envied; nor is that of the Eastern nations, who pay little regard to the titles of their sovereigns but sacrifice them every day to the caprice or momentary humour of the populace or soldiery.’

To do justice to the natural psychology that underlies Hume’s essay we must turn to his Treatise of Human Nature, where, as Bayle does in his Pensées Diverses of 1681, Hume establishes that in simple societies human beings could live without a ruler, but they would see the benefits of government when circumstances became more complex. Goods and possessions, thinks Hume, generate a need to secure them: ‘Throw any considerable goods among men’ and instantly they ‘fall a-quarrelling,’ while each ‘strives to get possession of what pleases him.’ The first formal governments, submits Hume, would have arisen from the need for a
captain to command with authority. Once in place, Hume suggests, this authority instructs its subordinates ‘in the advantages of government and teaches them to have recourse to it, when ... their riches and possessions have become so considerable as to make them forget on every emergence, the interest they have in the preservation of peace and justice.’\(^{34}\) At first, governments would have been ‘monarchical without any mixture and variety,’ and ‘republics arise only from abuses of monarchy,’ that is, a monarchy might become a republic were the ‘supreme power’ to become tyrannical, so provoking subjects to take up arms against it.\(^{35}\)

Hume, like Bayle drawing on the French school of neo-Stoical and sceptical thinkers, uses the history of Greece and Rome to show the inevitability of flux in human societies. There is government, on the one hand, and there is insurrection against government, on the other. Hume defends insurrection, but with caution. Like Bayle, he deplores violence, insisting that in ordinary circumstances ‘nothing could be more pernicious and criminal.’ Returning to the empirical mode, however, Hume insists that the memory of a violent revolution in a worthy cause is always praised. For example: ‘We may observe that this is both the practice and the principle of mankind that no nation that could find any remedy ever yet suffered the cruel ravages of a tyrant or were blamed for their resistance.’ Hume argues that in a complex society, history itself becomes the vehicle by which past acts of violence are detached from their horror and turned into heroism. For those who ‘took up arms against Dionysus or Nero or Philip II, have the favour of every reader in the perusal of their history and nothing but the most violent perversion of common sense can ever lead us to condemn them.’\(^{36}\)

So, Hume leaves readers of his own day and of ours with a paradox: Government is ‘entirely useless without exact obedience,’ and sometimes government is so oppressive that citizens feel compelled to take up arms against it. As does Bayle, Hume adopts the view that actors contemplating revolution must use prudence and common sense. We are obliged to ‘weigh the advantages we reap from authority,’ Hume says, ‘against the disadvantages of tumult and dissent.’ By these means ‘we shall become more scrupulous of putting in practice the doctrine of resistance.’\(^{37}\)

**Natural Inheritance: A Means to Future Stability**

By making a weak case for hereditary monarchy and a prudential, retrospective, case for resistance to a tyranny, Hume manages to defend the
status quo of the constitution of church and state in Britain in the eighteenth century. He proceeds to do so in three stages. First, he defends the Revolution of 1688 in England, whereby the monarchy was transferred from a Catholic dynasty to a Protestant dynasty. Second, he defends the establishment not of a republic, but of a new hereditary monarchy: The transfer of power from any present ruler to the next in line – whom he calls ‘the linear heir’ – is likely to provide a more stable transfer than would any other arrangement. The people cherish monarchy because they are protected by it; the monarch favours liberty because it is created by it and thus every advantage is obtained by the new establishment. Third, Hume praises the mixed regime of Britain, arguing that the mixed hereditary monarchy of his own society is greatly superior to the absolute hereditary monarchies of the European continent.

Like other Britons who were heirs to the Revolution of 1688, Hume continues to feel threatened by the historic memory of Catholic Christendom. In consequence, he continues to emphasize that in each society there must be an ultimate decision-making authority and that it must be a civil authority and not a religious authority. According to Hume, an enlightened government, whatever its form, compromises its commitment to rational law-making if it shares its authority with clerics, and it increases the risk if it shares its law-making with Catholic clerics.

In short, the opinion held in common by every lay thinker of the age of Bayle and Hume is that there must be a civil sovereign whose duty is to protect society from disorder as a means to the end of promoting enlightenment. For Bayle, writing between 1681 and 1706, the Bourbon dynasty in France, despite its official Catholicism, was heir to (Protestant) Henry IV, and had, until 1660 at least, used its sovereign authority to uphold the Edict of Nantes, which had protected the Huguenot minority. Though the regime had revoked that historic law, a revitalized elite exercising pressure through the pen – the republic of letters – would eventually ensure a reversal of the policy.

For Hume the best way of protecting British society from religious conflict in the eighteenth century is to prevent the return of a Catholic monarch and to defend the Protestant succession of the Hanoverians. Hume needs to show, therefore, that a hereditary succession provides a better – because more natural – instrument than an elective succession for dealing with future transitions. There were flaws, however, in this familiar argument, as Hume would have known, and Bayle had drawn attention to them in his entry on Bourgogne.
Conclusion

How should we summarize the perspective on monarchy and republic of these two thinkers of the sceptical school? Above all we should read both Bayle and Hume as philosophers who were aware that their age spoke in many idioms and that a political writer was apt to adopt an idiom that supported his point of view. The pervasive political idiom within which all others were expressed at this time was that of a post-Reformation network of sovereign Christian states consolidated by the Peace of Westphalia. The diplomatic community prudently recognized many constitutional variations, as well as the three approved Christian confessions of Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Calvinism. Each sovereign society that flourished within the network of sovereign states continued to require that every instructor of youth, and every moral educator, receive a Christian education. At the same time, and in addition, the scholars and elites of the age were steeped in classical ideas and values.

Both Bayle and Hume were aware, from their engagement with the ancients and with the Epicurean and neo-Stoical movements of the Renaissance and Reformation, that the very survival of humankind had from time immemorial been a precarious phenomenon. No divine intervention could be expected to solve the insecurities of kings, king-makers, and peoples. A government must be neither so tyrannical that it is overthrown, nor so pusillanimous that it dissipates into tumult and chaos. The negotiated settlements of the politiques that followed the religious wars in France and in the German states, and the civil war in England, created the conditions of peace, but those conditions needed the constant regulation of the diplomatic negotiators for whom the main agreed-upon premise was cuius regio eius religio (the religion of the state chosen according to the religion of the monarch). A society was at risk, experience taught, if there were no public religion, supported by a monarch and the makers of monarchs, although Bayle questions the extent of the risk. Either monarchical, or republican, or mixed regimes might hold society together, just as the public religion and its clerics could be either Catholic, or Lutheran, or Calvinist, but not Jewish or Muslim. Accordingly, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, debates about the forms of government could be conducted with more detachment than they are today. At heart, as Alexander Pope insisted, politicians were less interested in the dichotomy between monarchy and republic than in the relationship between civil authority and religious institutions.
Both Bayle and Hume defend the absolute *sovereignty* of any regime, as a necessary – though not a sufficient – condition of the public peace. Neither defends arbitrary or absolutist rule, even if some rulers happen to behave in an arbitrary or absolutist way. It was because he reasoned in this way that Bayle was accused of promoting absolutism. Bayle and Hume, as did Bodin, Grotius, and Hobbes, take it for granted that a thinker must defend, above all, the notion of the *sovereignty* of a state. In the context of Europe’s network of sovereign states, it was self-evident that a society’s form of government was irrelevant to the quality of its public policy. Absolute *sovereignty* – not absolute *monarchy* – combined with a government which upheld the public religion, and which tolerated certain minorities, was thus a presumed condition of the well-managed and peaceful state. Reciprocal recognition of the sovereignty of states ensured, too, that a state could protect itself against violent religious sectarians – some perhaps from abroad – who might seek to overthrow the government by force of arms.

In consequence, the diplomatic community took for granted that they should support monarchy in France, the republican regime in Geneva, and the mixed regime in the Netherlands. Absolute *sovereignty* (read as the doctrine whereby the prince controls, but is not beholden to, the majority Church) was, by the same token, presumed to secure the toleration of approved minority sects. In France under the Bourbon dynasty, the sovereign authority had sustained the Edict of Nantes for eighty-seven years (1598–1685), that is, until the Revocation the monarchical regime had safeguarded the policy of religious toleration for the Calvinist communities. For some Huguenots, those who had converted to the official religion, as well as those who had gone into exile, it went without saying that the regime would, in due course, restore toleration of its Calvinist minorities. A change in the form of government would have been irrelevant to the question. Through making this logical observation, Bayle incurred the enmity of certain Huguenot polemicists who supported William III’s English ambitions and, in consequence, was condemned for supposedly supporting the institution of absolute monarchy. Modern research confirms\(^4\) that the notion of absolutism, at the time it was applied to Bayle’s supposed constitutional preferences, was always a pejorative epithet – not a theory of government. The slur was propagated by those who, drawing on the contract theory of political obligation, openly supported a ‘regime change’ in England following the accession of a Catholic prince. Bayle, despite his acceptance of the Revolution of 1688 (like the English non-jurors) urged Huguenots to
remain neutral in the dispute. Whatever their hopes for a Protestant victory, he warns, Huguenots should avoid taking sides if only because as French subjects it was not their quarrel. Out of genuine opposition to war, Bayle argues that Huguenots in exile should be neutral in the Irish and European wars between William of Orange and Louis XIV. Bayle’s hope was that there would, in due course, be a general peace, a reinstatement of the Edict of Nantes in France, and a negotiated return to France for Huguenots exiled abroad.

For Hume in the mid-eighteenth century to write in defence of absolute sovereignty while condemning absolute monarchy was to defend the Protestant Reformation as it had affected political institutions in England and Scotland from the age of Elizabeth I. It was also to show a certain patriotism because British constitutional monarchy might be favourably compared with the French monarchical regime. Accordingly, Hume defends the Glorious Revolution of 1688 which overthrew the Stuarts and the settlement of 1707 which established the Protestant dynasty of the Hanoverians which survives to this day. He does so with weak arguments, perhaps deliberately, which leads an insightful reader to speculate about his underlying motives.

Both Bayle and Hume, in their different ways are heralds of the laicizing of society, present throughout Europe’s intellectual life from the time of the Reformation, and which would be given institutional expression in the American and French revolutions. As we have shown from the texts of their work, both promote their ideas by means of a sceptical approach to history, as well as by a refusal to be dogmatic about their preferred alternatives to the ideas of their opponents. Bayle, as we have argued, is convinced that the way forward is to recreate and extend the global republic of letters in which scholars, who may be of any religion or none, can teach and discuss critically what they believe to be true, including ideas about religion and government. Bayle transcends three great authors of an earlier era, Grotius, Bodin, and Hobbes, whom he, nevertheless, greatly praises. Bayle should be seen as something of a liberal ahead of his time, who in his defence of universal toleration anticipated less the political ideas of Hume than those of John Stuart Mill.

Hume, though an advanced mind, is less sure than Bayle that the ordinary person (as opposed to the elite philosopher) can do without the mystique of monarch or religion. He seems enclosed within a paradigm that is Protestant, insular, and fearful of Continental ideas, which he equates with Popery, despotism, and even Protestant sectarianism. Hume, who could well be called a ‘Euro-sceptic’ before his time, accord-
ingly sets himself the task of denying the hereditary claims of the Catholic Stuart monarchy in favour of a Protestant public religion embodied in the hereditary monarchs of the Hanoverian dynasty. In the American colonies, religious and constitutional fears of the sort expressed by Hume were soon to be overtaken by revolution. Bayle’s pluralist ideas, though rarely attributed to him, would be given greater recognition.

Notes


4 Ibid.

5 Jenkinson, *BPW*, 81.

6 Ibid.


10 David Hume, ‘Of the Protestant Succession’ [1752], *Political Writings*, ed. by Stuart D. Warner and Donald W. Livingston (Indianapolis 1994), 149–56.


12 See Richard Popkin, *The Philosophy of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*

13 Bayle, *Pensées diverses sur la comète*.

14 English translations of Bayle’s *Dictionnaire* in the eighteenth century include *An Historical and Critical Dictionary by Monsieur Bayle* (London 1710) and *Dictionary Historical and Critical* (London 1734–8).


17 A historian of the sceptical school praised by Hume, who followed Bayle’s reluctance to make judgments that could not be substantiated, was the Huguenot Paul de Rapin-Thoyras, author of *The History of England* (London 1732).

18 See James Moore, unpublished paper.

19 Bayle’s pamphlets included his *Lettre d’un refugié françois à un nouveau converti* 1688; *Réponse d’un nouveau converti à une lettre d’un refugié* 1689; and *L’Avis important aux refugiés* 1689. See, in Chapter 2 of this volume, the discussion by Luisa Simonutti of these pamphlets in the context of the controversy among Huguenots in exile, provoked by the Exclusion crisis in England, on the one hand, and the hostilities in Ireland and in Europe between Louis XIV and William of Orange, on the other. In the present essay we discuss these pamphlets solely from the perspective of Bayle’s scepticism about theories of institutions.

20 Aristotle, *The Politics*, Book V.

21 See Jenkinson, *BPW*, 81.

22 Ibid., 82.


24 Ibid.


26 See n9.

28 Hume, ‘Of the Protestant Succession,’ 149.
29 There had been a violent uprising in 1745 led by Charles Edward Stuart who continued to claim a hereditary right to the throne. It led Hume to delay the publication of his essay. See ibid., 149.
30 My emphasis.
31 Hume, ‘Of the Protestant Succession,’ 150.
32 He may have been referring to Frederick Louis, the Prince of Wales, 1707–1751, who died before he could succeed to the throne.
33 Hume, ‘Of the Protestant Succession,’ 150.
35 Ibid., 553.
36 Ibid., 552.
37 Ibid.
38 Hume, ‘Of the Protestant Succession,’ 150.
Without doubt the two most important pieces of French writing on political theory that appeared at the turn of the eighteenth century are Bishop Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet’s *Politics Drawn from the Very Words of Holy Scripture* (completed in 1704) and Archbishop François de Fénelon’s *Les aventures de Télémaque, fils d’Ulysse* (published in 1699). While Bossuet offers the greatest of all defences of divine right monarchy – in which Louis XIV’s rule is unbrokenly descended from Abraham’s covenant with God in Genesis (‘kings shall come out of thee’) – Fénelon, by contrast, theorizes what might be called a ‘republican’ monarchy in which the key notions are simplicity, labour, the virtues of agriculture, the absence of luxury and splendour, and the elevation of peace over war and aggrandizement. This proto-Rousseuvian, demilitarized ‘Spartanism’ led Louis XIV to read *Télémaque* as a satire on his luxuriousness and bellicosity, and Fénelon fell permanently from official favour. Fénelon combines monarchial rule with republican virtues in a unique way: after him Montesquieu was to draw a necessary connection between monarchy and ‘war and the enlargement of dominion’ and to separate monarchy by a categorical gulf from republican simplicity and virtue; Rousseau was to restore a more nearly Fénelonian view of republican monarchy in his glowing Plutarchian encomium of Lycurgus – in a Sparta not just temporally and geographically but morally distant from Versailles.

Fénelon’s republican monarchism is not a disconnected, free-standing thing-in-itself, but an outgrowth of his more general moral and political austerity and simplicity – an austerity and simplicity which arose, in turn, from his religious-theological thought, as will now be seen.
François de Salignac de La Mothe-Fénelon was born in Périgord in 1651, the son of an aristocratic provincial family which although distinguished was threadbare. Ordained a priest in 1675, he was within three years given an important ministry in the Church – that of spiritual guide to the ‘New Catholics’ (ex-Huguenots) in northern France. This ministry lasted for a decade (1678–88), and was crowned by the publication of the treatise *On the Education of Girls* (1687), which first revealed Fénelon’s classicizing taste for the ancient pastoral simplicity depicted by Virgil in the *Aeneid* and *Georgics*. By this time the abbé Fénelon had caught the eye of Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, the bishop of Meaux and the most powerful French ecclesiastic of the *grand siècle*: for him Fénelon produced his *Réfutation de Malebranche* (c. 1687–8), which attacked Nicolas Malebranche’s notion of a Cartesian *Providence générale* operating through simple, constant, universal laws, and sustained Bossuet’s notion (outlined in the *Histoire universelle*) of a *Providence particulière* which had produced David and Solomon for ancient Israel and Louis XIV for modern France. In 1689 he was named tutor to Louis’s grandson, the duc de Bourgogne (1682–1712); and it was for his royal pupil that Fénelon was soon to write *Thélèmeque, fils d’Ulysse* (c. 1693–4) and the *Dialogues of the Dead*. Rhetorically the high point of Fénelon’s court period was his speech on being received into the Académie Française (1693), with its fulsome praise of the Sun King. The archbishopric of Cambrai followed in 1695, carrying with it the titles of duke and prince of the Holy Roman Empire.

In the late 1680s, however, Fénelon had also become deeply interested in the quietistic notion of a ‘disinterested love of God’ free of hope for personal happiness – a disinterested interest fanned by the mystical pieties of his friend Mme Guyon. His insistence that one must ‘go out of oneself’ (*sortir de soi*), even ‘hate oneself’ (*se haïr*), finally yielded the *Maxims of the Saints on the Inner Life* (1697) – a work in which Fénelon argued for five degrees of purity or disinterestedness in human love of God. At the lowest end of this scale one finds the love of God, not for himself but for ‘the goods which depend on His power and which one hopes to obtain’; this Fénelon contemptuously calls ‘purely servile love.’ On one small notch above this Fénelon places loving God, not for ‘goods’ which He can provide but as the instrument of our salvation: even this ‘higher’ love, however, is still ‘at the level of self-love.’ At the third and fourth levels Fénelon finds a mixture of self-love and true love of God; but what really interests him is the fifth and highest degree: the pure love of God that one finds only in saints: ‘One can love God,’
Fénelon urges, ‘from a love which is pure charity, and without the slightest mixture of self-interested motivation.’ In such a love, Fénelon adds, neither the fear of punishment nor the hope of reward play any part at all.\textsuperscript{12} As is well known, Bossuet and others – including Malebranche, in his *Traité de l’amour de Dieu*\textsuperscript{13} – argued that Fénelon’s disinterested love excluded all hope of salvation, as well as all fear of justified punishment, and thus subverted Christianity. Fénelon’s work was finally placed on the Index of banned books in March 1699. In this condemnation the prime mover was Bossuet, now Fénelon’s greatest detractor: ‘To detach oneself from himself to the point of no longer desiring to be happy, is an error which neither nature, nor grace, nor reason, nor faith can suffer.’\textsuperscript{14}

A month later *Télémaque* was printed, without Fénelon’s permission, through ‘the infidelity of a copyist.’\textsuperscript{15} Louis XIV had already banished the ‘chimerical’ Fénelon to his Cambray diocese in 1697, and with the double disaster of 1699 – condemnation by Rome followed (within a few weeks) by publication of the ‘Homeric’ novel which Louis considered an attack on his faults – Fénelon was divested of both his pension and his tutorship to the duc de Bourgogne. He never set foot in Versailles, or even Paris, again.\textsuperscript{16}

With the premature death in 1712 of the duc de Bourgogne, whom Fénelon had carefully educated to be an enlightened successor to his grandfather, Fénelon’s hopes for a renewed France collapsed like a house of cards. His *Démonstration de l’existence de Dieu* (1713) is a work of pure theology;\textsuperscript{17} indeed, had Fénelon not been a royal tutor for ten years, *Télémaque* and the *Dialogues of the Dead* would almost certainly never have come into existence. Conscientiously administering his half-Flemish diocese even as Louis XIV made perpetual war on its borders, constantly engaging in a wide-ranging correspondence as spiritual counsellor, Fénelon died, prematurely worn out, in January 1715.\textsuperscript{18} To this day many French Fénelonians view the Archbishop of Cambrai as a saint and martyr, the victim of the interested high politics of Louis XIV, Bossuet, and the Roman curia.\textsuperscript{19}

The year 1716 saw the posthumous publication of the magnificent *Letter on the Occupations of the Académie Française* (written in 1714), in which Fénelon contributes to ‘the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns’ by offering glowing praise of Homer, Plato, Demosthenes, Virgil, and Cicero, and insisting that ‘it is our insane and cruel vanity, and not the noble simplicity of the ancients, which needs to be corrected.’\textsuperscript{20} It was that ‘noble simplicity’ which he had tried to illustrate, in the demi-Platonic myths of ‘Bétique’ and ‘Salente,’ in *Télémaque, fils d’Ulysse*\textsuperscript{21}.
When the ancient poets wanted to charm the imagination of men, they conducted them far from the great cities; they made them forget the luxury of their time, and led them back to the age of gold; they represented shepherds dancing on the flowered grass in the shade of a grove, in a delightful season, rather than agitated hearts, and great men who are unhappy in virtue of their very greatness ...

Nothing so much marks a declining nation, as this disdainful luxuriousness which rejects the frugality of the ancients. It is this depravity which overturned Rome ...

I love a hundred times better the poor Ithaca of Ulysses, than a city [Imperial Rome] shining through so odious a magnificence. Happy the men who content themselves with pleasures that cost neither crime nor ruin!22

Howsoever *Télémaque* may have contributed to Fénelon’s downfall, the book was spectacularly successful: it was the most read literary work in eighteenth-century France after the Bible. First translated into English in the very year of its original publication, it was re-rendered by no less a figure than the novelist Tobias Smollett in 1776; and a Danish prince was raised on it.23 In Rousseau’s *Emile* the eponymous pupil is given *Robinson Crusoe* as his sole adolescent reading, then Fénelon’s *Télémaque* on reaching adulthood24 – a striking concession from the most austere republican of the Enlightenment.

It was no accident that Rousseau so greatly admired Fénelon’s fable; for, like *Emile*, *Télémaque* is the story of the moral and political education of a young man by a knowledgeable and virtuous tutor. While Emile is – in some sense – Everyman, the tutor in *Télémaque*, Mentor, is preparing a young prince to succeed Odysseus at Ithaca.25 Fénelon himself, in a letter from 1710, indicates his objective in writing *Télémaque* for his royal pupil, the duc de Bourgogne: ‘As for *Télémaque*, it is a fabulous narration in the form of an heroic poem like those of Homer and of Virgil, into which I have put the main instructions which are suitable for a young prince whose birth destines him to rule ... In these adventures I have put all the truths necessary to government, and all the faults that one can find in sovereign power.’26

Louis XIV, for his part, saw nothing but the alleged faults of sovereign power in *Télémaque* – faults which Fénelon describes at length in his account of the misrule of Idomeneus, former king of Crete. (Since Idomeneus kills his own son and is deposed and exiled, one can
understand Louis’s displeasure!) One of Mentor’s long speeches to the slowly reforming Idomeneus (now king of Salente) in Book X of Télémaque must have been read by Louis XIV as a veiled, if mythologized version of what Fénelon would have wanted to say at, or rather against, Versailles:

It is with sadness that I feel myself constrained to tell you hard things; but shall I betray you by concealing the truth from you? Put yourself in my place. If you have been deceived up till now, it is because you wanted to be; it is because you have feared advisors who were too sincere. Have you sought after people who were the most disinterested, and the most likely to contradict you ... to condemn your passions and your unjust feelings? ... No, no: let us see whether you will now have the courage to be humiliated by the truth which condemns you.

... You have exhausted your riches; you have never thought of augmenting your people, nor of cultivating fertile lands. Was it not necessary to view those two things as the two essential foundations of your power – to have many good people, and well-cultivated lands to nourish them? It would require a long peace to favor the multiplication of your people. You should never think of anything but agriculture and the establishment of the wisest laws. A vain ambition has pushed you to the very edge of the precipice. By virtue of wanting to appear great, you have let yourself ruin your true greatness. Hasten to repair these faults; suspend all your great works; renounce this display which would ruin your new city; let your people breathe in peace.27

Nor does Fénelon put such speeches only into the mouth of Mentor. Indeed, Fénelon, speaking in his own voice, says nearly the same thing in his celebrated letter to Louis XIV:

Your people whom you ought to love as your own children, and who have until now been so devoted to you, die of hunger. The cultivation of the earth is virtually abandoned. The cities and the countryside are depopulated. All occupations languish and no longer support the workers; all commerce is destroyed ... The whole of France has become a great hospital, desolate and without provisions ... The people who loved you dearly and had such confidence in you are losing their good will, their confidence, and even their respect. Your victories and conquests no longer bring them joy; they are full of bitterness and despair. Sedition begins to grow every-
where; the people are convinced that you have no pity for their misfortunes, that you care only for your own authority and glory.  

In every part of Telemachus, Son of Ulysses, at every turn and in every chapter, the inventions de la vanité et de la molesse are denounced. In Book VII, having escaped the seductions of Calypso, Mentor and Telemachus are told a story of the land of Bétique by Adoam, who reveals that the luxuries of Greece and Egypt are anathema in that simple land:

> Among these people [Adoam says] we found gold and silver put to the same use as iron – for example as plowshares ... They are almost all shepherds or laborers [who practise only] those arts necessary for their simple and frugal life ... When one speaks to them of peoples who have the art of making superb buildings, furniture of gold and silver, fabrics ornamented with embroideries and with precious stones, exquisite perfumes ... they reply in these terms: ‘These people are very unfortunate to have used up so much labor and industry in order to corrupt themselves. This superfluity softens, enervates, torments those who possess it: it tempts those who are without it to want to acquire it through injustice and violence. Can one call “good” a superfluity which serves only to make men evil? ...’ It is thus, Adoam went on, that those wise men spoke, who learned their wisdom only by studying mere nature.  

(Rousseau must be remembering this Fénelonian inversion of the usual value of precious metals when, in the ‘Government of Poland,’ he suggested awarding gold medals to the lowest public benefactors, silver ones to those who contribute more, and plaques of steel to those who most advance the general good.)  

The unfortunate outgrowths of vanity and ‘flabbiness’ are set in even higher relief by Fénelon’s account of the austere and noble pleasures of ‘just kings’ who live in the eternal daylight of the Elysian fields. In Book XIV of Télémaque, Telemachus is ferried across the river Styx by Charon, where he sees rulers ‘who have governed men wisely’ enjoying ‘a happiness infinitely greater than that of the rest of men who have loved virtue on earth’: ‘Neither blood-covered War, nor cruel Envy which bites with a venomous tooth, and which bears vipers wound around its middle and its arms, nor Jealousy, nor Mistrust, nor Fear, nor vain Desires, ever approach this happy abode of peace ... A pure and gentle light sur-
rounds the bodies of these just men, and covers them in its rays like a
vestment.'31 Here, of course, the *Champs Elysées* take on some of the
colouration of a Christian heaven – even if Fénelon’s avowed models are
Homer and Virgil. And that Christian coloration is further brightened
by the dark pages on Pluto’s ‘ebony’ regime in Hades.

What is least Homeric, in the end, is the transformation of the notion
of heroism in *Télémaque*. The nominal hero, of course, is Telemachus –
the son of a greater hero, Ulysses.32 But the true hero of Fénelon’s work
is certainly Mentor: it is he who educates and restrains a Telemachus who
could easily degenerate into another Idomeneus. The true hero for
Fénelon is not the wanderer on an Odyssey to Ithaca, nor a *Louis le Grand*
who sacrifices real goods to apparent ones; the true hero is the moral-
civic educator – the man whom Rousseau later calls ‘the true miracle’ in
*Du contrat social* (II, 7).33 The proof comes at the very end of *Télémaque*:
Mentor undergoes a metamorphosis and is revealed as Minerva (goddess
of wisdom), and the book ends abruptly before Telemachus is shown
being reunited with Ulysses. The real hero has already been resolved
into pure Wisdom, while the nominal hero barely reaches Ithaca.

What that true hero teaches is a political version of Fénelon’s quietistic
disinterested love of God: just as one truly loves God only by renouncing
self-interested *amour propre* (the hope for personal salvation), so too for
Fénelon the ‘idea of pure disinterestedness dominates the political the-
ories of all ancient legislators.’ In antiquity ‘it was not a matter of finding
happiness in conforming to that order but, *au contraire*, of devouring one-
self for love of that order, perishing, depriving the self of all resources.’34
Fénelon completes this thought with a wonderful passage which Rous-
seau must have had in mind when he wrote the *Économie politique* for
Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* sixty years later: ‘All these [ancient] legislators and
philosophers who reasoned about laws presupposed that the fundamen-
tal principle of political society was that of preferring the public to the self
– not through hope of serving one’s own interests, but through the sim-
ple, pure disinterested love of the political order, which is beauty, justice,
and virtue itself.’35 If one brackets God out of Fénelonian thought, Rous-
seau’s republican ideal is more than half in place. And what is displaced
is virtually everything imagined or accomplished by Louis XIV. That is
clearest, perhaps, in Fénelon’s ‘On Pure Love,’ where he writes:

Nothing is so odious as this idea of a heart always occupied with itself: noth-
ing delights us so much as certain generous actions which persuade the
world (and us) that we have done the good for love of the good, without
seeking ourselves therein. Self-love itself renders homage to this disinterested virtue, by the shrewdness with which it tries to take on the appearance of it – so true is it that man, who does not bring himself about, is not made to seek after himself, but to exist solely for him who has made him. His glory and his perfection consist in going out of himself \([\text{sortir de soi}]\), in forgetting himself, in losing himself, in being swallowed up in the simple love of infinite beauty.\(^{36}\)

As a first approximation to the truth about Fénelon, then, one can say that the whole of his practical thought – religious, moral, and political – is held together by the notion of disinterested love, of ‘going out of oneself’ in order to lose oneself \((\text{se perdre})\) in a greater Beyond (or, in the case of God, Above). The disinterested love of God, without self-interest and hope for benefits, is pure charity (as in Pascal’s \textit{Pensées}, in which ‘the self is hateful’ and charity is ‘of another order’);\(^{37}\) the disinterested love of one’s neighbour is friendship (as in Cicero’s \textit{De amicitia});\(^{38}\) the disinterested love of the \textit{polis} is a proto-Rousseauvian republican virtue. On this view of the moral world, an austere Pascalian \textit{charité} and a Platonic sublimated (made-sublime) \textit{eros} meet: small wonder that Fénelon, a brilliantly sympathetic classical scholar, loved the \textit{Symposium} and \textit{Phaedrus} with non-concupiscent passion.\(^{39}\) (The notion that egoism is evil ties together figures as radically different as Plato, Augustine, Pascal, Fénelon, and Rousseau: in each of these there is a sublimated ascent from low to high. Here Kant is exceptional: for him \textit{all} love is ‘pathological,’ and ethics needs ‘reason-ordained objective ends,’ not sublimated \textit{eros}.\(^{40}\))

It is precisely the charge of insufficient disinterestedness which Fénelon brings even against Cicero himself in the \textit{Letter on the Occupations of the Académie Française}.

No one admires Cicero more than I do ... But one notices some adornment in his speeches: their art is marvelous, but one foresees it; the orator, in thinking of the salvation of the Republic, does not forget himself and does not let himself be forgotten. Demosthenes seems to go out of himself \([\text{sortir de soi}]\), and to see only the fatherland. He does not seek out the beautiful, he offers it without thinking of it; he is above admiration ... I avow that I am less moved by the infinite art and the magnificent eloquence of Cicero, than by the quick simplicity of Demosthenes.

But the disinterestedness which Cicero sometimes lacks, for Fénelon, must appear in the historian who would understand politics:
The good historian is not from any time or any country: while he loves his fatherland he never flatters it in anything. The French historian must make himself neutral between France and England: he must praise Talbot as gladly as Duguesclin, and render as much justice to the military talents of the Prince of Wales as to the wisdom of Charles V.41

It is, however, not finally sufficient to say merely that disinterested civic virtue, à la Sparta, is a political version of the disinterested love of God: for the city can never be the worthy object of pure love that God is. For Fénelon Spartan virtue is a kind of collective egoism – it goes beyond the self, but not above the self. It is a lateral encompassing, not an ascent (as in Plato’s Phaedrus or Augustine’s Confessions).

Disinterested statesmanship is the link, for Fénelon, between good politics and true or full disinterested love; but fully disinterested love goes well beyond mere politics. True disinterestedness requires ‘dying to oneself’ (mourir à soi) – so that even when Fénelon speaks of finding oneself in God (qua object of ‘unmixed’ love), the self must still be self-effacing.42 One can, paradoxically, hope for the eternal happiness which is reserved to the elect (through special grace given by a divine volonté particulière)43 only if, here below, one loves a God who might ex hypothesi damn one eternally; one may finally get happiness, provided the hope for it was never one’s motive – as in Kant’s ‘postulate’ of a summum bonum (virtue and happiness combined) that one may receive provided one’s incentive was never eudaemonistic.44

A closely related Fénelonian problem is this: one must will the ‘pure love’ of God, and for Fénelon the most worrying thing about Jansenism is its demi-Calvinist shrinking of will to the vanishing point (to make room for grace).45 But will is the spontaneous self-determination of a subject, a self, unless one defines will as fully determined ‘last appetite,’ in the manner of Hobbes’s Leviathan (chapter vi). Bossuet may have attacked Fénelon from an unworthy motive: but what Bossuet says against Fénelon’s notion of human motivation – that it gives a motiveless motive, a will-less will, an effacement of self-concern that is inconceivable in a finite being – is not obviously wholly mistaken. From a morally suspect motive Bossuet may have shown that Fénelon’s notion of motive is itself conceptually suspect. Here Bossuet also has the advantage of standing with the Thomist tradition of the Summa contra Gentiles (III, 25): ‘The final end of man, as of every intellectual substance, is called felicity or happiness; it is that which every intellectual substance desires as its final end, and because of that only.
The knowledge of God is thus the happiness and the final end of every intellectual substance.’

The republican statesmanship which Mentor recommends to Idomeus in Télémaque Book X (and which Fénelon himself recommended to Louis XIV) is in any case a very weakened, attenuated version of pure love – it is what the Maximes des saints calls ‘mixed love.’ What Fénelon really admires is withdrawal from the ordinary social world, a sublimated ascent to God. For one must acknowledge ‘the brevity and uncertainty of life, the inconstancy of fortune, the faithlessness of friends, the illusion of great positions … the discontent of the great, the nothingness of all the greatest hopes, the emptiness of all the goods one possesses, the reality of all the evils that one suffers.’ And the sole remedy is the sortir de soi: the one who would be saved ‘will have contempt for himself and hate himself, he will leave himself, he will fear himself, he will renounce himself, he will abandon himself to God, he will lose himself in Him. Happy loss!’46 In a sense Fénelon ought to have been an ascetic, standing outside society, a stylite on his column in the desert; instead he was an archbishop, duke, and prince of the Holy Roman Empire. Some unsympathetic biographers have suggested that Fénelon unconsciously courted the social annihilation which Louis XIV brought down on him: and indeed there may well be, within Fénelon, a permanent tension between an inherited aristocratic notion that noblesse oblige and an other-worldly mysticism that shrinks not just from nobility but from life itself. It is no wonder that Fénelon, contrasting ancient and modern versions of Oedipus, preferred Sophocles to Corneille47 – for it was the Greek who said, ‘best never to have been born.’

The ascetic side of Fénelon, surely the deepest one, is well expressed in an astonishing paragraph from the essay, ‘Happiness of the Soul which Gives Itself Entirely to God’:

It is in seeing God that one sees the nothingness of the world, which will evaporate like a mist. All forms of greatness, and their consequences, will vanish like a dream: every height will be pulled down, every power will be wiped out, every proud head will be bowed under the weight of the eternal majesty of God. On that day when he shall judge men, with one glance he will efface everything that shines in this present night, as the sun in rising effaces all the stars. One will see only God everywhere, so great will he be … What has become, men will say, of those things which had enchanted our hearts? What is left of them? Alas: there remains not even the mark of the place where they stood.48
The object of (even purely disinterested) statesmanship, then, will still be comparatively low: the temporal well-being of people who mostly will not be saints, who can at best be taught a quasi-ancient austerity that will not be positively corrupting. Even if they love the *polis*, à la Demosthenes, what is it that they disinterestedly love? The earthly city of Augustine’s *De civitate Dei* – a terrestrial vale of tears in which even the benevolent judge will torture and kill the innocent from sheer ignorance (‘though we acquit the judge of all malice, nonetheless we must admit that human life is miserable’). Fénelon himself possessed in full measure an Augustinian gift for cataloguing social calamities in depressing detail, as is clear in his *Pastoral Letter* for Lent 1711:

> Iniquity abounds, and charity is chilled. Display and ambition make the rich inhuman and pitiless. Misery and despair reduce the poor to theft and infamy ... Luxury sustains itself only at the cost of the widow and the orphan. The false conveniences which have been invented, contrary to the simplicity of our fathers, inconvenience the very ones who can no longer do without them, and ruin all families. Commerce no longer turns on anything but fraud. Society is full of suspicions, of envenomed criticism, of cruel mockery, of jealousy, of disguised slander, and of treachery. The more needs grow, the more one sees growing with them avidity, envy, and the art of harming to exclude one’s competitors.

One often wonders: why does the Fénelonian God create a finite world full of pilgrims most of whom will not reach their heavenly destination? Even the saints who love God purely, hoping for nothing, cannot ‘add’ to his glory – for Christ himself added nothing, by the Incarnation, to God’s lovable perfection (as Fénelon makes clear in the *Réfutation de Malebranche*). Why, then, to pose Leibniz’s question, should there be ‘something rather than nothing,’ on the Fénelonian view? All theodicies, all attempts to ‘plead the cause of God,’ are defeated by this question; it is because theodics all start with a (basically Greek) notion of an infinitely perfect, self-sufficient Being, then try to ask what motive such a being can have had to create a world which is ‘metaphysically evil’ (Leibniz) or ‘débris’ (Malebranche) or ‘falling into ruins’ (Fénelon). But no such motive is imaginable, given an Aristotelian conception (*Ethics* 1178b) of perfect self-sufficiency; nothing finite and temporal could satisfy a Being whose only joy would flow from self-contemplation ad infinitum.

It is hard to see why, then, in Fénelon, there should be any finite
world (in time) at all. This was a general problem for the thinkers of Fénelon’s generation – with Malebranche saying, in his *Traité de la nature et de la grace* (1680), that there is no natural rapport between the *être infiniment parfait* and the ‘ruined’ world, that only Christ *qua* ‘perfect victim’ redeems the finite.\(^5^6\) It is no wonder, then, that Fénelon loved Plato so much: for it is Plato above all (*Republic* VII, 526b) who magnifies eternal changeless ‘essence,’ free of all Heraclitean flux, and who shrinks mere ‘genesis’ in time to an ‘unsuitable’ object of study. But then another Genesis becomes difficult to explain, and the Incarnation of Christ changes from condescension to something unintelligible. It is not accidental that while Fénelon’s one-time mentor Bossuet wrote a work entitled *Politics Drawn from the Very Words of Holy Scripture*, Fénelon’s great contribution to politics, *Télémaque*, is styled ‘continuation of the fourth book of the *Odyssey*’: at least Homer was Greek, even if the heroic ethos of the Homeric age was still ‘monstrous,’\(^5^7\) not yet a Socratic/Platonic love of eternal moral verity (*Phaedo* 75d, *Euthyphro* 9e-10e) in a republic.

St Paul had denigrated Greek *philosophia* in I Corinthians (‘where is the wise?’), and Tertullian had driven a wedge between Athens and Jerusalem;\(^5^8\) if Bossuet tilts markedly towards the city of David, Fénelon inclines towards that of Socrates and Demosthenes. If Bossuet built on Genesis 17, 6 (‘kings will come out of thee’), and insists on the wisdom of David and Solomon (‘the wisest of all kings’), Fénelon places his faith in Odysseus’s wisdom as revealed by Homer, and his hope in Odysseus’s son Telemachus. Certainly some very characteristic Fénelon utterances seem more Greek, and more exactly Platonic, than Christian: ‘As soon as we shall no longer have any desires or fears, with respect to the body, we shall remain freed from the law of time. The extinction of all personal will and the detachment from all that changes, places us in that eternal peace for which we are made.’\(^5^9\) (Fénelon’s natural drift is ever eastwards, towards nirvana.)

Indeed, ironically enough, it may be only Plato who can ‘redeem’ the temporal world in some measure for Fénelon. At least, for Fénelon, disinterested friendship and republican civic virtue are shadows of a pure love; and a shadow enjoys a ghostly, secondary, epiphenomenal existence. It is not utterly illusory: it is cast by something real – as in Plato’s *Timaeus* (49b) the apparent strives to participate in the real. Fénelon’s Platonism, shaped above all by *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, certainly reduces genesis/Genesis to a bare wisp of being: ‘Let us love eternal beauty, which does not grow old, and which keeps from aging those who
love only her; let us have contempt for this world which is already falling into ruins in all its parts.\textsuperscript{60}

Why should Fénelon have chosen Telemachus? He did so simply because Telemachus is the perfect Greek candidate for Fénelonian education. He is young, not yet fully formed; he providentially vanishes from Book 5 to Book 15 of the \textit{Odyssey}, leaving Fénelon a chance to develop him freely; he is the son of the wisest of the heroes of the Trojan War, Odysseus, and destined by the Fates to be king of Ithaca. That descent from Odysseus was central to Fénelon, as a glance at the \textit{Dialogues on Eloquence} and at the \textit{Dialogues of the Dead} (‘Odysseus and Achilles’) shows:

In the \textit{Iliad} Achilles is ... represented naturally, with all his faults; these faults themselves are one of the subjects on which the poet wanted to instruct posterity ... It is true that the \textit{Odyssey} represents, in Odysseus, a hero who is more regular and more accomplished ... it is indeed the case that a man whose character is that of wisdom, like Odysseus, shows a conduct which is more exact and more uniform than that of a young man such as Achilles, who is of a boiling and impetuous nature ... The \textit{Odyssey} contains, on all sides, a thousand moral instructions for all the situations of life; one has only to read it to see that the painter has only painted a wise man (who is equal to everything through his wisdom) in order to teach posterity those fruits that one must expect from piety, prudence, and good morals.\textsuperscript{61}

And in ‘Odysseus and Achilles’ Fénelon has Telemachus’s father tell Hector’s killer that ‘I have borne for twenty years, at the siege of Troy and in my voyages, all the dangers and all the misfortunes that can exercise the courage and the wisdom of a man.’ By contrast, in Odysseus’ view, Achilles shows only ‘impetuous folly’ and is as brutal as Ajax.\textsuperscript{62} For Fénelon the Greek ‘heroes’ at Troy are as egomaniacal as those in Shakespeare’s \textit{Troilus and Cressida} – with the crucial exception of Ulysses.

In a sense, however, what matters most about Telemachus is his pre-Christianity: that is an advantage because ‘interested’ hope for personal happiness is not his motive. For it is Fénelon’s view that Christianity vibrates between the sublime (pure love of God) and the contemptible (anxiety over personal well-being, egoism eternalized). If ancient virtue lacks the sublime object of high Christianity, it is at least not selfish; its motive is sublime. Horrified as Fénelon would have been by most of
Nietzsche’s *Antichrist*, he would have agreed that the obsession with personal salvation is reducible to the notion that ‘the world revolves around me.’

Thus it is a constant Fénelonian strategy to say: you see that even the pagans had a loftier idea of *disinterestedness* than is usually found in our modern times; the ancients at least understood non-egoistic motivation, even if they aimed at a less-than-final object – at friendship or civic virtue or beauty, and not at God. The intention was right even if the end was admirable rather than final. For Fénelon most Christians have the right object (God) but the wrong motive (self-love); for him most ancients have the right motive (disinterestedness) but the wrong object (the *polis* or republic).

It is revealing that, in the great quarrel with Bossuet over disinterested love, Fénelon can find nothing more damning than the assertion that even the Epicureans (never mind the Platonists!) had a higher idea of disinterested love than those modern Christians who mix personal hope and fear with their devotion to God. Since the gods of Epicurus are famously without providence, what could be more telling than to rank Bossuet’s celebrated *Providence particulière* (which supplies Louis XIV to France *en particulier*) beneath the most reviled and execrated of ancient philosophical sects? Fénelon, in any case, certainly finds that Bossuet’s Judaizing Hellenophobia made Graeco-Roman republicanism impossible. According to Bossuet:

> All that Sparta, all that Athens, all that Rome – or, to go back to the beginning, all that Egypt and the best-governed states – had by way of wisdom, is nothing in comparison to the wisdom which is contained in the law of God, from which other laws have taken their best features.

> Moreover, there was never a finer state constitution than that under which you will see the people of God.

> Moses, who formed it, was instructed in all the divine and human wisdom with which a great and noble genius can be embellished; and this inspiration only brought to the last degree of certainty and perfection what had been only sketched in the usages and knowledge of the wisest of all the empires and their greatest ministers – such as the patriarch Joseph, like him inspired by God.

> Two great kings of this people, David and Solomon, the one a warrior, the other pacific, both excellent in the art of governing, will give you examples of it not only in their lives, but also in their precepts: the one in his divine poetry, the other in the lessons which eternal wisdom dictated to him.
Bossuet goes on to denigrate ancient republicanism by insisting that ‘Rome began in that way [with monarchy] and finally came back to it, as to its natural state’:

It was only late, and little by little, that the Greek cities formed their republics ... The ancient opinion of Greece was that expressed by Homer in that celebrated sentence from the Iliad: ‘Several princes are not a good thing; let there be only one prince and one king’ ... All the world thus began with monarchies; and almost the whole world has remained [in that state] as its most natural condition.

We have seen, too, that its basis and its model is in the paternal empire, that is to say in nature itself.65

Nothing could be more distant from Fénelon than this paternalizing Scripturalism – in which the republics of Greece and Rome are nothing.

For Fénelon even good politics – ancient disinterestedness and civic virtue – is not a sufficient going out of oneself (sortir de soi). But if politics cannot be simply good (God alone is good), it can be less bad: one can at least avoid a Hobbesian politics in which ‘the passion to be reckoned upon is fear’ or a Hegelian type of politics in which the state is a satisfying realization of ‘mind on earth.’66 At a minimum Fénelon can be a kind of neo-Augustinian: recognizing the necessity of politics but not ‘taking it for more than it is’ (Oakeshott).67 What is plainly ruled out, for Fénelon, is a Machiavellian view of politics as glorious, as the supreme work of human art (as in the Introduction to Book I of Machiavelli’s Discourses). For Fénelon the politics of Bétique (or even Salente) can at best offer a morally tolerable, austere refuge while one waits for an eternal felicity that one scarcely dares hope for:

Those who cultivate their reason and who love virtue – can they compare the vain and ruinous luxury which in our times is the plague of morality and the shame of the nation, with the happy and elegant simplicity which the ancients place before our eyes? Virgil, who saw all the magnificence of Rome from close up, turned the poverty of King Evander into the grace and the ornament of his poem [the Aeneid] ... Virgil even goes to the point of comparing a free, peaceable, and pastoral life with the voluptuous actions, mixed with trouble, which come into play with great fortunes. He imagines nothing happy except a wise mediocrity, in which men would be
secure from the desire for prosperity, and [full of] compassion for the mis-
eries of others.\textsuperscript{68}

Insofar as Fénelon fuses ‘ancient’ disinterested love with a ‘modern’
object (the Christian God), he truly is, in the words of Sainte-Beuve,
‘\textit{sî athénien et sî chrétien, tout ensemble}’,\textsuperscript{69} and he truly is – anticipating the
language of the Rousseau who loved him disinterestedly – a ‘modern
who has an ancient soul.’\textsuperscript{70}

For Rousseau owed to Fénelon nothing less than the legitimation of
his obsession with Graeco-Roman antiquity. If an early Genevan reading
of Plutarch set off this propensity, it was Fénelon’s \textit{Telemachus} (1699)
and \textit{Letter on the Occupations of the Académie Française} (1714) that con-
firmed and dignified it; thus Fénelon’s ‘Roman’ \textit{auctoritas} and \textit{gravitas}
were worth a great deal.

Because one cannot hope to point out every parallel between Fénelon
and Rousseau, the best course is to bring out affinities between
Fénelon’s last work, the \textit{Letter on the Occupations of the Académie Française},
and Rousseau’s first, the \textit{Discourse on the Arts and Sciences} (1750), the
work that made Rousseau Rousseau. Fénelon’s \textit{Letter} was written soon
before his death in January 1715, and was posthumously published the
following year. It is the \textit{summa} of Fénelon’s thought, drawing together
his favourite themes. But above all the \textit{Letter} is celebrated as the most
important turn-of-the-eighteenth-century contribution to the ‘the quar-
rel between the ancients and the moderns’ – the quarrel to which Rous-
seau was soon to contribute so much.

That quarrel itself, however, has a limited side and a much broader
significance. The limited quarrel was French, took place mainly between
1685 and 1715, and was fairly narrowly literary; the broader and more
important quarrel was pan-European and political. The ‘large quarrel’
goes back at least to Machiavelli’s claim in \textit{The Discourses} that the golden
age of ancient Roman civic virtue remains a perfect model for intelli-
gent imitation by modern men, whenever \textit{fortuna} affords the opportu-
nity, and extends forward in time – after Rousseau’s ardent ‘Spartanism’
– to Benjamin Constant’s celebrated essay on ancient versus modern lib-
erty in the post-Napoleonic period. The quarrel between the ancients
and the moderns, then, had a very long run, and it included phenom-
ena as significant as Poussin’s and Lorrain’s paintings of Greek and
Roman pastoral felicity at the very moment of Louis XIV’s glittering
ascendancy at Versailles.
Fénelon was an important contributor to that large political-cultural quarrel stretching from Machiavelli to Rousseau to Constant – though his posthumously published *Letter* was nominally concerned with a more parochial fight within the Académie Française (between the classicist Boileau and the modernist Fontenelle, for example). To be sure, Fénelon’s *Letter* deals with the local and narrow issues of the day – such as the question of whether French is less adequate and expressive than Greek and Latin or whether the rhyme schemes of Corneille are more forced and stilted than those of Sophocles. However, in subordinating the ‘insane and cruel vanity’ of the moderns to the ‘noble simplicity’ of the ancients, in praising Homer, Virgil, Plato, Demosthenes, and Cicero as nearly perfect models, Fénelon goes well beyond Parisian academic quarrels about rhetoric and diction to offer a general encomium of pre-Christian civilization.

That is, of course, paradoxical, as Fénelon was not only a Christian but an Archbishop. Nevertheless, his view (in the *Maximes des saints*) is that most modern Christians love God from a base and interested motive (hope for personal salvation), whereas the ancients disinterestedly loved the *polis* and sacrificed themselves for it.

It is easy enough to see why Rousseau so cherished Fénelon and made Fénelon’s *Telemachus*, with its quasi-Platonic Utopias of pacific and agricultural simplicity, the only book that Émile is encouraged to read on reaching adulthood. (One can certainly understand the dismay of Archbishop Beaumont of Paris: Émile is not given Scripture, or even Bossuet’s *Politics from Scripture*; he is given a ‘Greek’ work bearing the subtitle *Continuation of the Fourth Book of the Odyssey*. He is given Tertullian standing on his head: If we have Greece, what need of Jerusalem?)

If, indeed, Rousseau had died in the early 1750s, before the writing of *Inequality* and the *Social Contract*, leaving the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* as his main legacy, he would now probably be thought of as a minor if eloquent embroiderer of familiar Fénelonian themes. For the *First Discourse* (1750) is Rousseau’s initial contribution to the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns; with its magnification of Spartan and Roman republican civic virtue and its denigration of Athenian aestheticism, it is an extension of the view that Fénelon had made famous in his 1714 *Letter*. It is almost as if Rousseau, on the road to Vincennes to visit Diderot in prison, were thinking of these Fénelonian lines: ‘Nothing so much marks a declining nation as this disdainful luxuriousness which rejects the frugality of the ancients. It is this depravity which overturned Rome ... I love a hundred times better the poor Ithaca of Odysseus.’
Because Fénelon’s Letter is so proto-Rousseauvian, in his Discourse on the Arts and Sciences Jean-Jacques needed only to enlarge upon a long familiar subordination of modernity to antiquity; mainly he needed to add Cato and Brutus to the Socrates whom Fénelon had already made a civic saint. He did this, in effect, by collapsing Socrates into Cato and Brutus: Socrates is now the only acceptable Athenian, but that is because he willingly died for the sake of the laws. The Platonic Socrates who hears the harmony of the spheres and sees the psyche as a Pythagorean geometrizing echo of a consonant kosmos yields to Socrates the civic martyr in the Crito. Socrates displays ‘the general will one has as a citizen.’ That last phrase however, reveals what is not yet present in the First Discourse. If what is ancient, à la Fénelon, is fully there in the First Discourse, what has not yet appeared is modern ‘voluntary agreement’ as the basis of legitimate government, as found in the Social Contract. There must be voluntariness as something morally crucial before ‘general will’ can be a will of a particular kind, and that voluntariness is Augustinian Christian – as is Rousseau’s emphasis on ‘conscience’ in the Lettres Morales and his insistence on the final arrival of adult moral autonomy at the end of Émile’s denaturing, transformative education. The civic généralité of Roman-Spartan antiquity has not yet been fused in the First Discourse with the autonomy and will of Inequality and the works that succeed it. Indeed, the key term volonté générale does not even appear until the Discourse on Political Economy.

But may Rousseau not have found the notion of an always-right general will, at least in part, in Fénelon’s letters to Lami, written at the end of the first decade of the eighteenth century? There Fénelon says:

God could limit himself to giving to all men, without predestining any of them, the same grace, fully sufficient for all. He could say to himself: I shall give my heavenly reward to all those who by their free will answer to this [divine] help, and I shall deprive of this reward all those who, being in a position to merit it, do not will to make themselves worthy of it. On this supposition, could you accuse God of injustice? Not the slightest inequality would appear; not the slightest favoritism [prédilection]; not the slightest preference; everything would be general [tout serait général], effective, proportional to [human] need, and abundant on God’s part. There would be no inequality except on the part of men: all inequality would come from their [wrongly used] free will.

This language would certainly have been of interest to Rousseau, for it virtually equates justice with generality, equality, and the absence of
favouritism – the very things that shape the meaning of justice in *Du contrat social*.

From a Rousseauvian perspective, Fénelon begins well by *imagining* a God who links up justice, generality, and equality (although later, to save the dogma of predestination, he severs the tie between généralité and justice, trying to justify God’s particularistic favouritism by appealing to Scripture – ‘many are called, but few are chosen’). But at least Fénelon starts at the right point; indeed, he (at first) relates généralité and égalité to each other more strongly than had any figure before Rousseau himself. Indeed, in Fénelon’s initial account of a non-predestining God one might almost be reading *Du contrat social*: ‘Not the slightest inequality would appear; not the slightest favoritism; not the slightest preference; everything would be general, effective, proportioned to need.’ Might not Rousseau’s city be an imitation of what God could have done had he wished to dispense with all particular grace? For then vox populi would be (almost) vox dei.

How much of Rousseau’s general will (of the sovereign people in a republic) is traceable to Fénelon is disputable, since the debt to Malebranche is still greater. But what is not disputable is that Fénelon’s republican monarchy is the direct ancestor of Rousseau’s versions of Lycurgus and Numa – the ‘great educators’ who transform natural egoists into generally willing citizens and ‘Spartan mothers.’ Fénelon’s anti-egoistic, republicanizing disinterestedness (*sortir de soi*) leads straight to Rousseau; so much so that Mentor’s farewell speech to king-becoming Telemachus could as easily be Rousseau’s Lycurgus or Numa engaged in the ‘denaturing transformation’ of self – lovers:

But would you prevent the ingratitude of men? Do not labor solely to make men powerful, rich, formidable in war, and to procure them the pleasures of luxury: that power, that wealth, and those pleasures will corrupt, and render them still more vicious, and consequently more ungrateful: it is making them a fatal present, and furnishing them with a delicious poison. But exert your utmost endeavors to reform their morals, and to inspire them with the love of justice, with sincerity, the fear of the gods, humanity, fidelity, moderation, and disinterestedness: by making them virtuous, you will prevent their being ungrateful, and will procure them the most substantial of all blessings, namely, virtue; which, if genuine, will always attach them to him who will have inspired it. Thus by procuring them the solid advantages of virtue, you will do yourself a service, and will have no occa-
sion to fear their ingratitude. Is it surprising that those princes find men ungrateful, who set them no examples but of injustice, boundless ambition, jealousy of their neighbors, inhumanity, haughtiness, and bad faith? A prince cannot expect they should act otherwise than as he has taught them.76

That last line is pure Fénelon – and pure Rousseau.

Notes


2 Bossuet, *Politics Drawn from the Very Words*, 245: ‘It is again God who establishes reigning houses. He said to Abraham, “Kings shall come out of thee.”’

3 Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, ed. by A. Cohler et al. (Cambridge, 1989), Book V.


9 For the text of Fénelon’s reception-address, see *OF*, vol. 3, 210–13: ‘Travaillez donc tous à l’envie, messieurs, pour célébrer un si beau regne.’


14 Bossuet, ‘Avertissement’ to *Quatre écrits sur les maximes des saints*, cited by


16 Aimé-Martin, *Vie de Fénelon*, xxii ff. In his celebrated letter to the duc de Chevreuse (31 Aug. 1699), he says that ‘I am in a dry and bitter peace, in which my health increases with work’ (*Correspondence de Fénelon* (CF), ed. by Jean Orcibal (Geneva 1993), vol. X, 23.

17 For a fine commentary, see Gouhier, *Fénelon philosophe*, 127ff.


19 In this vein, see Raymond Schmitte, *L’aspect politique du différend Bossuet-Fénelon* (Mainz 1954), 13–25.


21 *Fénelon, Télémaque, fils d’Ulysse*, ed. by Albert Cahen (Paris 1922), Books VII and X. (This fine edition has valuable notes relating Fénelon’s text to Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Plato, etc.)


25 Rousseau, *Emile*, 431: ‘Emile is not a king, nor am I a god, so that we are not distressed that we cannot imitate Telemachus and Mentor in the good they did.’


Fénelon’s ‘Republican’ Monarchism

(Edinburgh 1951), 163–5; Rousseau, ‘Rome et Sparte,’ in Political Writings, ed. by C. Vaughan (Cambridge 1915), vol. 1, 314ff.

31 Fénelon, Télémaque, fils, 407.

32 Fénelon, ‘Ulysse et Achille,’ in Dialogues des morts, ed. by B. Jullien (Paris 1938), 13–14. See also Fénelon, ‘Achille et Homère,’ ibid., 9–10, in which the poet urges that ‘the adventures of the wise and patient Odysseus are worth much more than the anger of the impetuous Achilles.’

33 Rousseau, Du contrat social (‘The Legislator’), in Political Writings (Watkins), 44–5.


35 Rousseau, Économie politique, in Political Writings (Vaughan), vol. 1, 237ff.

36 Fénelon, ‘Sur le pur amour.’

37 Pascal, Pensées, ed. by Leon Brunschvicg, in La grands écrivains de la France (Paris 1914), nos. 473–83 and (above all) 792.

38 Cicero, De amicitia, cap. V: ‘We believe then that one must seek after friendship, not through hope for the advantages which one will draw from it, but because the fruit of friendship is in friendship itself’ (Fénelon’s version in ‘Sur le pur amour,’ 307).

39 Fénelon, ‘Sur le pur amour,’ particularly 308: ‘Plato [in the Symposium] cites the example of Alcestis, who dies to make her spouse live. That, according to Plato, is what makes man a god – preferring the other, through love, to oneself, to the point of forgetting oneself, sacrificing oneself, counting oneself as nothing.’

40 Kant, Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone, trans. by T.M. Greene and H. Hudson (New York 1960), 6n.


43 See particularly Fénelon’s letters to Francois Lami (on grace and predestination) in Oeuvres spirituelles (Antwerp 1751, orig. 1718), vol. IV, 290–321.


49 St Augustine, De civitate Dei, Book XIX.


51 Fénelon, ‘Réfutation du système du Père Malebranche,’ in Oeuvres de Fénelon,


54 Malebranche, ‘Méditation chrétiennes et métaphysiques,’ in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 11, 73.


60 Fénelon, ‘Bonheur de l’âme,’ 331.


70 Rousseau, ‘Jugement sur la Polysynodie’ (of Abbé de St Pierre), in *Political Writings* (Vaughan), vol. 1, 421.


73 Ibid., 185.

74 Fénelon, *Oeuvres spirituelles*, vol. 4, 290.

75 Riley, *The General Will*, ch. 5.

76 Fénelon, *Télémaque, fils*, Book XVIII.
The eighteenth-century French monarchy can scarcely be held in view without simultaneously thinking of its demise in the flames of the revolution at the century’s end. The Ancien Régime, the very name the French attached to their past, was testimony to the revolutionaries’ abiding hostility to the monarchy and to their determination to replace it with a republic that represented not just institutional improvement but the prospect of resetting the clock of history. This new beginning to which monarchy became the obstacle marked the advent of modernity. The prejudices cited in the introduction to this volume – that monarchies must be backward, repressive, and unjustifiable – are what those who invoked the Ancien Régime meant to say about the Bourbon monarchy.

The very drama and scale of the revolutionary eruption which so quickly disposed of the French throne gave rise to the notion that, despite their great age and powers of survival throughout a thousand years of European history, monarchies were by their nature transitional regimes.¹ Their self-contradictory structures were compromises between a sticky past and a promised future that had already announced itself in passions of protest before it arrived. The French Revolution appeared to open a window into the inner mechanisms and dynamics of historical time that revealed a teleology in which humanity would find a secular culmination. Despite disagreement over the future stages of these nineteenth-century philosophies of history, each account agreed on a common take-off stage: monarchy. Whether characterized as feudal, absolute, or even constitutional, monarchy was assigned a lower standing in the ascent of humanity than republic. Monarchy was undesirable and unworkable.

If such were the case, Edmund Burke’s opposition to the revolution
Michael Mosher

was simply futile. He had no grounds on which to stand. Nevertheless, he claimed them. Criticism was justified because history was not on the track of determinism but open and contingent. We have a choice, claims Burke, about inheritance. The French had chosen badly by rejecting theirs.

Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) made two points about this inheritance. First, there existed in France an ancient unwritten constitution in which the freedoms of representative government under monarchy were a natural evolutionary possibility. Second, for it to profit from prudent reforms, French society was all that it should have been on the eve of the revolution. Burke makes it a question of what was open to France, given its understanding of state sovereignty, and what might have been achieved by more prudent revolutionary leaders on behalf of a society whose habits of cooperation were still intact.

In addressing the issue of state power, Burke writes, counterfactually: ‘You might, if you pleased, have profited of our [English] example [in 1688] and have given to your recovered freedom a correspondent dignity. Your privileges [of representation]... were not lost to memory ... Your constitution, it is true ... suffered waste and dilapidation but ... [y]ou might have repaired those walls; you might have built on those foundations.’

In talking about civic habits, Burke alleges: ‘You had all these advantages ... but you chose to act as if you had never been molded into civil society and had everything to begin anew.’ Among the treasures thus spurned were ‘a flourishing commerce ... a free constitution, a potent monarchy, a disciplined army, a reformed [!] and venerated clergy, a mitigated [!], but spirited nobility to lead your virtue not to overlay it ... [and the possibilities inherent in an upwardly mobile] liberal order of commons to emulate and recruit that nobility’ (my emphasis).

A long line of critics has maintained that Burke was simply wrong. There was first, the difficulty about sovereignty. It was, according to Bodin, absolute and, according to Bossuet, sacred. Rather than ‘repair walls,’ the revolutionaries had to tear them down since sacred and absolutist pretensions no longer suited significant portions of enlightened eighteenth-century French public opinion about what the sovereign dignity of government or nation required. But dismantling was easier said than done. Although there may have been some point in Bodin’s sixteenth-century attempt to elevate the throne above religious schism by proclaiming the king’s indisputable and absolute right to decide in the last instance, Bossuet’s seventeenth-century effort to do this one bet-
ter by sacralizing the crown did not improve on the strategy. Historian Dale Van Kley doubts that the eighteenth-century monarchy could have climbed down from its Bossuetian heights. Governance understood as an imitation of divinity was now in the hands of a ‘propertied and privileged church.’ In addition, far from insulating the king from religious divisions, the sacred character of the monarch’s authority exposed him to politically motivated conflicts over what divinity within church and state meant.

Alexis de Tocqueville’s classic *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* casts doubt on Burke’s supposition that the French could have relied upon pre-existing habits of cooperation. Interestingly, Tocqueville’s argument also challenges Burke’s opponents, for whom the Ancien Régime sums up everything both unattractive and irrelevant. For Tocqueville, the old regime was far from irrelevant. Not only were the French unable to form a social consensus or to engage in political cooperation in the eighteenth century because, famously, they ‘were split up more than ever before into small, isolated, self-regarding groups,’ but this pattern prevails into the nineteenth century, almost as though the Great Revolution had not happened or did not matter.

In these rebuttals, Burke’s counterfactual picture of what might have happened in France to avoid a violent revolution sounds as utopian as any other revolutionary fantasy of the 1790s. But where did Burke come by this portrait of an alternative France? Consider the language where Burke invokes the character of the constitution that already existed: ‘You had the elements of a constitution very nearly as good as could be wished ... you had all that combination and all that opposition of interests; you had that action and counteraction which, in the natural as in the political world, from the reciprocal struggle of discordant powers, draws out the harmony of the universe.’

It is identical to the Newtonian or Copernican scientific imagery employed by Montesquieu in *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), where the political equivalent of natural forces bearing upon matter in motion were found in the ambivalent or contradictory ambitions of honour seeking actors: ‘You could say it is like the system of the universe where there is a force constantly repelling all bodies from the center and a force of gravitation attracting them to it. Honour makes all the parts of the body politic move ... each person works for the common good believing he works for his individual interest’ (*Laws* III.7, p. 27).

Monarchical actors were simultaneously drawn in by the gravitational allure of patriotic service to the state – the source of honour – and yet
they strove just hard enough in the centrifugal direction to escape the reputation of dishonourable conformity to those currently in control of state and court, an escape that alone would permit each actor a distinctive identity and therefore the possibility of making a mark on the world and of contributing to the state. Personal ambitions agitated society but never, according to Montesquieu, the properly constituted monarchical state, which despite the contrary passions that honour elicited, exhibited, he was confident, the serene celestial permanence of a planet orbiting the sun. This was not a portrait of monarchy as a transitional condition tipping towards revolution.

Burke’s passage also reminds one of the Montesquieu for whom the permanence of monarchy was guaranteed by its balance of diverse interests and separated powers, which was the ongoing task for moderate and prudent legislators: ‘In order to form a moderate government, one must combine powers, regulate them, temper them, make them act; one must give one power a ballast, so to speak, in order to put it in a position to resist another’ (Laws V.14, p. 63).

Being similar in their views about the permanence and plausibility of the Bourbon monarchy, were Montesquieu and Burke, then, both fantasists about its potential for stability and success? One difference between them is that Montesquieu wrote in mid-century, forty years before the revolutionary events, when there were still political choices. Not unaware of the shortcomings of the Bourbon regime, the baron proposed an image of a progressive monarchy sufficiently attractive that it became a widely shared partisan view.8 From 1748, when The Spirit of the Laws first came out, to 1771 there was, in effect, a party of Montesquieu organized around a parlementaire ideology that readers found in his text.9 Moreover, Montesquieu’s activities between 1748 and his death in 1755 indicate a high involvement in the controversies of the day. He advised both parlementaire allies and the king himself in the 1752–3 controversy over the refusal of sacraments. These events included the exile of parlement and a three-way struggle between Jansenists, Church party, and Crown. If one were to look for the springtime of civil society in France, these are plausible years. Montesquieu’s 1748 book supplied as much of the ideological message as any Jansenist pamphlet. Montesquieu was not wholly in sympathy with the Jansenist-leaning opposition groups in the parlements. Nevertheless, along with a secular public of salon and coffeehouse, he shared with these religious-minded judicial dissidents an appreciation of the institutional possibilities opening up in state and society. By the time of the revolution, however, there was noth-
ing left of this spirit of deliberative resistance. Chancellor Maupeou had destroyed it in the four-year exile of the *Parlement de Paris* that began in 1771.

On the question of sovereignty, Montesquieu splits the difference with the critics. Surprisingly, he retains the Bodinian throne, but exiles Bossuet. The sage of Bordeaux is silent about the ecclesiastical element of the constitution, declaring only — this was understatement — that he ‘did not insist upon’ church privileges (*Laws* II.4, p. 28). Bossuet’s famous interpretation of royal majesty as ‘the image of the greatness of God in a prince’ was quietly dropped. In his private notebooks, Montesquieu wrote that the Bishop of Meaux (Bossuet) had ‘the mannerisms of a seminarian [who would call] a bundle of sticks a bawdy delight.’ This is disparagement worthy of the radical Enlightenment. Already in the *Considerations* on the Romans Montesquieu had implicitly rejected the bishop’s providential message that God intervenes constantly in human affairs. Favouring, instead, a philosophy friendlier to the natural sciences, one indebted to Descartes and Malebranche, Montesquieu averred that God never violates the order of his laws, which made it possible for humans to discover them purely by natural means. Though Montesquieu desired to boost the prospects of the system of seigniorial courts that dotted the French countryside as exemplars of ‘mediate channels of power’ that would tame the intemperance he expected from the overly centralized state, he does not want to extend the jurisdiction of the alternative, ecclesiastical courts. In Montesquieu’s understanding, the French do not need to appeal to Providence to understand themselves or their history, nor do monarchs need to appeal to divinity to justify themselves to a public that had adapted to a science of natural causes and an ethics based on social utility and secular rights.

Bodin, however, is another matter. *The Spirit of the Laws* affirms Bodinian absolutism: ‘in a monarchy the prince is the source of all political and civil power’ (*Laws* II.4, p. 17, my emphasis). Absolute sovereignty, the ultimate power to decide, rests with the holder of royal authority. The significance of this declaration is easy to miss, however, as it is packaged into a sequence of anxiously repetitive sentences that introduce, for the first time, the intermediary powers, which many interpreters naturally expect were intended to break the grip of the Bodinian absolute sovereign. That the author of the division of powers doctrine was an absolutist may seem to contradict Montesquieu’s reputation as an advocate of sharing power, but if Nicholas Henshall is right, it is a matter of the
changing meaning of the term ‘absolute.’ At one time ‘absolute and shared power ... operated side by side in the same ancien regime.’

Montesquieu’s definition of the sovereign power of the monarch is as absolute as any king could wish, and yet, as Henshall would have expected, the king’s absolute power does not seem in Montesquieu’s text to be inconsistent with his sharing power to the extent of consulting with intermediary bodies and seeking from parlements the consent entailed in the registration of royal legislative acts.

Given the fact of his absolute power, however, what happens when the monarch asserts his Bodinian right to overrule any ‘intermediary power’? For Montesquieu, ‘honour’ comes to the rescue as a cultural supplement to the law. Honour is the political principle that actually undermines the narrowly legitimate exercise of monarchical power. But when it is countenanced rather than suppressed, honour guarantees the wider legitimacy of the regime. In the case of an overruled intermediary power, honourable judges will be expected, when the stakes are high, to continue to resist. Resistance as such is illegal under an absolutist code, but in the culture, under the code of honour, resistance is mandated. Aristocratic honour requires obedience to the monarch, but it simultaneously makes that obedience provisional by requiring every subject to draw a prior conclusion about the continuing worth or honourableness of the higher authority in question. The aristocrat both upholds hierarchy and submits it to democratic censure. Honour discovers that a rebel necessarily dwells in the soul of every obedient citizen. The appeal to honourable dissent is as illegal as it is effective. It necessarily attunes power-holders to study by way of anticipation the plural sensitivities of differentiated subjects, thus introducing into a royal court otherwise little disposed to such measures a due respect for a multifarious diversity of interests and understandings. Of course, the stakes are made even higher when it is recognized that the honour of the monarch is also at stake as the success of parlementaire dissent implies the failure of the throne.

This dignified disobedience, that is, civil disobedience, is the dissent of the stubborn. The judges, Montesquieu writes, ‘never obey better than when they drag their feet,’ because only then do they ‘bring into the prince’s business the reflection that one can hardly expect from the absence of enlightenment in the court [of Louis XV]’ (Laws V.10, my emphasis).

As for Tocqueville’s argument that, contra Burke, there existed no great capacity for cooperation on the eve of revolution, Montesquieu’s
own ambivalence about the role of the honour-bearing aristocrat affirms the relevance of the question. Was the nobility going to lead by demonstrating a capacity for cooperation with other groups or was the nobility going to isolate itself in its pursuit of exclusive privilege? Montesquieu’s text does not always reassure the reader. Honour points in two directions. It is first introduced democratically. Irrespective of class, ‘honour is ... the prejudice of each person and each condition,’ and it ‘can inspire the finest actions’ when ‘combined with the force of laws’ (Laws III.6). Honour, in effect, ‘reigns like a monarch over the prince and the people’ (Laws III.10, p. 30). In these passages nobility becomes a spiritual heritage whose education in the manners of freedom is available to every subject. But an exclusivist definition points in an altogether different direction: ‘prerogatives will be peculiar to the nobility and will not transfer to the people’ (Laws V.9, p. 55). This passage accords better with the picture Tocqueville provides of a society divided into ‘small, isolated self-regarding groups.’

In 1748 the French nobility faced in two directions. Identified with a tradition of ancient liberties, nobles thought of themselves as the exclusive leaders of a nation increasingly subject to abuse by the projects of a centralizing state. To lead, however, required alliance with other elites. The nobility could have invited the nation to assimilate the cultural norms of aristocracy – and its spirit of leadership – without insisting that only the nobility deserved to rule. Without using the term ‘honour,’ Tocqueville says as much in his discussion of the character of freedom in eighteenth-century France (in Part II, chapters 10 and 11 of the Ancien Régime). It was a path Montesquieu’s Esprit des lois had opened to its aristocratic readers, a temptation in the 1750s and 1760s, but not apparently one when it was needed in the 1780s.

By the time of the revolution the big book of Baron Montesquieu had a new readership. In harangues to republican audiences, Robespierre quotes Montesquieu’s praise of the regime, not Rousseau’s. This was appropriate, given the militant character of the revolutionary republic. Montesquieu’s understanding of this political form may be distinguished from others by the extent to which he viewed the republic as a repository of great and aggressive energy. He thought that the love of the republic and the love for the ‘equality’ it represented would become so intense that it would demand of each citizen ‘a renunciation of oneself’ and a purging of the particular passions that would leave one with only an abstract passion for the general order (Laws IV.5, p. 35; V.2–3). By contrast, the French monarchy catered to the particular passions.
Although it was impossible for the former judge not to admire republican government, Montesquieu’s remarks were meant as a critique of its potential to sponsor illiberal values. Montesquieu did not necessarily want to condemn the equality-promoting republic when he sensed in it a capacity for political misadventure. However, the problematic character of this theoretical alternative to monarchy gave him an incentive to show that a decent politics might be salvaged from the throne of Louis XV. It was anyway for Montesquieu monarchy and not the republic that was potentially cosmopolitan and open to plural understandings of the good life.

Despite the repressive measures that his vaunted parlement allies could sometimes advocate and enforce, Montesquieu identified enlightenment not only with French society but with a monarchy whose intermediary powers, even when they lacked enlightenment, served to resist the ever-present potential for administrative despotism.16

The evident counter-model was England. But Montesquieu did not especially care for English manners. Far from wanting France to become a little England, he saw the English as imitable. They could still serve as a model for how to achieve a balance of political power in the service of political freedom, but there were other models for balance and, as well, another model of liberty couched in the spontaneous manners of the open society. English manners were gruff, sincere but misanthropic. This English moodiness inclined its bearers to a solitary – certainly gender-segregated – existence, suitable to the individual genius, but also suitable to melancholy spirits.17 A spontaneous and epicurean open society was out of the question.

By contrast, Montesquieu’s picture of French monarchical society celebrates its sociability and openness to experiments. Its spirit was elsewhere conveyed by Montesquieu’s adoption of the pregnant term ‘commerce.’ Commerce, which reaches out and for Montesquieu incorporates ‘communication,’ referred not only to cross-border trade in goods, which was in any event thought to ‘cure destructive prejudices,’ encourage ‘gentle mores,’ and ‘lead to peace’ (Laws XX.1–2), but to much else besides. Commerce/communication came simultaneously to mean what we call, with a bluntness that might betray the elegance Montesquieu expected from each activity, free trade, free speech, and free love. Its home apparently was French civilization:

If there were in the world a nation which had a sociable humor, an openness of heart, a joy in life, a taste, an ease in communicating its thoughts;
which was lively, pleasant, playful, sometimes imprudent, often indiscreet, and which had with all that, courage, generosity, frankness, and a certain point of honour, one should avoid disturbing its manners by laws, in order not to disturb its virtues. (*Laws* XIX.5)

Montesquieu’s analysis of monarchy furthermore expressed the hope that this culture or *esprit* would make it difficult to impose such laws. However, the republic was different. It was required to depend on schemes of government surveillance of private life, because as a matter of its basic constitution every republic presupposed its own particular unified understanding of the public good and necessarily counted on all its citizens to possess a suitable character for maintaining this good. Since many of the ‘corruptions’ of character stem from the influences of diverse private lives, republics necessarily have a category of ‘private crimes,’ which become matters for the ‘public’ prosecutor. By contrast, surveillance of private life is an eminently dispensable option for monarchy. It is nowhere required by monarchy’s constitution since monarchical institutions are open to plural interpretations of the common good and, in addition, are necessarily not anxious about the most difficult aspect of the public good to maintain in the republic, namely, equality. Montesquieu thought that the repressive laws of the republic would be sufficiently optional under monarchy that there even ‘public crimes [would be] more private’ (*Laws* III.5, p. 25).

Montesquieu’s contemporary readers might have objected, for this was not an option French institutions always refused or avoided. Montesquieu was, in effect, trapped by his own commitment to a decentralized monarchical politics that sought to balance local and regional power against that of the central state. For the only available allies for the redress of a power imbalance included Jansenist judges and conservative *parlements*. Their censorious politics showed that they were more than ready to ignore the philosopher’s libertarian and liberal advice about what monarchy should be prepared on constitutional grounds to tolerate and even encourage.

This brings us to free love, Montesquieu’s decorously named ‘private crimes’ (*Laws* III.5). His Jansenist and judicial readers would have had to read selectively to miss the libertarian and epicurean dimensions of the model of monarchy that he advocates. Since so much of the repressive legislation of the classical republic focused on family matters and especially on women, Montesquieu’s demonstration that monarchy is more liberal than the republic begins with the demonstration that there
is no political reason why one should not simply applaud the greater liberties of women under the monarchy: ‘One could constrain [French] women, make laws to correct their mores, and limit their luxury, but who knows if one would not lose a certain taste that would be the source of the nation’s wealth and a politeness that attracts foreigners to it?’ (Laws XIX.5, p. 310).

Since the rebellion of Roxanne in Montesquieu’s novel Persian Letters (1721), the heroic and also libidinous woman choosing a society of lovers over familial isolation had been his preferred figure of the politically free society. Enlightenment, moreover, requires the free activities made possible from participation in a society beyond the borders of family and tribe. Usbek, the ostensible philosopher in search of enlightenment, learned nothing in France because in imitation of the king – this was an indictment of Louis XIV – he isolated himself in Versailles. Only Usbek’s ‘virtuous’ wife Roxanne, driven into illicit society in rebellion against her jealous husband, proved capable of learning. She exhibited her virtue not as a wife but as a citizen who opted for the open society. Enlightenment and sociability are in this tale mutually implicated intimate allies. Both evidently countenanced personal betrayal with equanimity. In The Spirit of the Laws Montesquieu generalizes these thoughts into a kind of communication ethics: ‘the more communicative a people are, the more easily they change their manners.’ Women are the force behind this potential for disorder: ‘the society of women spoils mores.’ This judgment is not, however, a disapproving gesture. Montesquieu thinks only of the benefits of being rid of mores that are too pure: the ‘society of women’ also ‘forms taste’ and improves society (Laws XIX.8).

The method of this commerce/communication carries men and women beyond the exchange of goods (free trade), even beyond the exchange of partners (free love) to an exchange and debate about norms (free speech). The latter implicates the very idea of the good, which has now become negotiable and seemingly uncontrollable by any gatekeeper other than the autonomous good sense of the communicating participants. Isaiah Berlin’s romantic celebration of a diversity allegedly absent from Enlightenment thought is already present in this classic Enlightenment text’s encomium to the transgressive possibilities, if I may use this postmodern term, of a freely communicating citizenry. Montesquieu does not hesitate to identify these activities as those of a free society. This expanding range of free ‘communication’ produces in free trade an innovation and industriousness in France that stands in
invidious contrast to the laziness and poverty of the Spanish (Laws XIX.10). The spirit of sociability fostered under French monarchy also contrasts with the conformity of the Chinese where ‘the rites ... seem to order everything to be separate [and] as one has seen ... such separation is generally linked to the spirit of despotism’ (Laws XIX.18). The communicative are enjoying whatever it is they are communicating about; but they are also instructing themselves in how to be free: ‘one is less communicative in countries where each man, whether a superior or an inferior, exercises and suffers an arbitrary power, than in those in which liberty reigns in all conditions.’ There is an invariable sign that marks the presence of arbitrary power: ‘women are ordinarily enclosed there and have no tone to give’ (Laws XIX.12).\footnote{18}

Montesquieu could not possibly have held that such a society sponsored freedom while the monarchical state maintained despotic or arbitrary rule. We are entitled to conclude that for Montesquieu the mid-eighteenth-century monarchy was amenable to reform even if at the same time the regime suffered from the inherent defects of royal court life and had, since the Bourbon ascension, showed tendencies to degenerate into despotism. This is an interpretation not only of eighteenth-century political possibilities on the part of Montesquieu and his allies, but it is also evidently an interpretation of Montesquieu. Given alternative accounts of both Montesquieu and of his estimation of French prospects, I conclude with an appeal to four authors who provide evidence for the claims I have advanced above, or have prepared the way for them: Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, Daniel Roche, Raymond Aron, and Elie Carcassone.

Chaussinand-Nogaret asks unusual questions. Was an earlier generation of scholars right to excoriate the aristocracy as reactionaries standing in the way of progress? Did the bourgeoisie set the standard for what commercial progress meant? Chaussinand-Nogaret’s seminal work, The Nobility in Eighteenth-Century France, argues that, to the contrary, the aristocracy was itself the vehicle of progress and open to the new intellectual currents. Far from playing second fiddle to the bourgeoisie, it was a leader in the economic development of France: ‘Nobles either alone or in association with members of the greater business bourgeoisie, showed their dynamism, their taste for invention, and their ability as economic leaders.’\footnote{19}

That many of the cultural and ideological influences at work in eighteenth-century France were religious in inspiration should surprise no one who realized the seriousness of the French protests against the
papal constitution *Unigenitus* (1713). In the pursuit of these disputes one finds in much recent scholarship a fascination with once-obscure polemics like the Jansenist author Louis-Adrien Le Paige\(^{20}\) or François Richer that has cast the figures of the high Enlightenment, such as Montesquieu or Rousseau, into the shadows. Chaussinand-Nogaret, however, reminds his readers of an older historiography in which figures like Montesquieu were not damned by their apparent Olympian detachment. He was as involved in the religious dispute over *Unigenitus* as any *parlementaire* polemicist.\(^{21}\) As Chaussinand-Nogaret explains in *Le citoyen des lumières*, ‘with more spirit and talent [than Le Paige and the other *parlementaire* ideologists], and in addition written under the discipline of a prudent self-censorship, *L’Esprit des lois* quietly affirms the *parlement* in its claims.’\(^{22}\)

Social historian Daniel Roche’s magnum opus, the recently translated *France in the Enlightenment*, places the French monarchy and Montesquieu’s interpretation of it at the centre of enlightened hopes for the future. Montesquieu’s model of reform monarchy had entered popular consciousness. ‘By making the *corps intermediaires* an element in the unwritten constitution ... Montesquieu took a crucial step with implications that extended beyond the aristocracy: at stake was the liberty of all which only a composite elite could guarantee.’\(^{23}\) Roche’s odd phrase ‘composite elite’ refers to a divided leadership, fractured not necessarily by ideology, but by social origins, contemporary circumstances, and future aspirations. This idea will be more familiar to us if instead of ‘composite elite,’ we substitute the idea of ‘multicultural elites.’ One of the dimensions of monarchy that seemed to attract Montesquieu and which told against the otherwise admirable republic – whose required homogeneity made it unsuitable as a site for citizens who insisted on recognizing heterogeneous origins – was that only monarchy, he believed, could accommodate heterogeneity.

The trade-off was inequality. Under monarchy inequality was legally imposed, though both Voltaire and Montesquieu saw that the possibilities for earning money in novel ways was beginning to undermine legal inequality of privilege. While they recognized that money produced its own inequality, they optimistically thought its impact would be less severe.

For Roche, Montesquieu set the terms of debate in the mid-eighteenth century. Public policy was stretched between the two poles of liberty and despotism. The ‘distinction [would] justify criticism of the monarchy (which the *parlements* undertook to provide) and permit hope
of reform ... but also, what was even more important, it made it possible to think about the heritage of the past, the weight of tradition, and the still vital forces that existed within the old landed kingdom while simultaneously doing justice to the new society in which there was room for trade, wealth, and talent.’ Roche is far from the historiography that condemns the Ancien Régime on grounds of its anticipated demise in a future revolution. Echoing a similar praise of monarchy in Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, Roche offers this summary of Montesquieu’s influential view: ‘Monarchy ... was the state for modern times.’ However, unlike Montesquieu, Hegel did not consider the ethos of honour an appropriate road to modernity.²⁴ For Roche, a generation of French readers of Montesquieu disagreed. Monarchy and honour were mutually implicated and suited to one another because honour accommodated ‘the judgments of people of different ranks.’²⁵ Honour was a crucial notion permitting aristocratic Europe to end up on the road to liberalism.

In identifying Montesquieu as the first of the sociologists, Raymond Aron sees Montesquieu’s monarchy in similar terms. A polity suited to large-scale territory could not always count on the citizen homogeneity required in most accounts of republican citizenship. The monarchy anticipates the problems of every large-scale democratic political enterprise. Too unfocused and latitudinarian always to be able to count on intense citizen commitment, too given to activities that reinforce the desire to distinguish oneself – the ancient activity of honour in new dress – contemporary democracies must recognize the trade-offs implicit in both their size and the heterogeneity of their citizens. ‘[Montesquieu’s] ultimate opinion,’ Aron writes, ‘was that the social order is essentially heterogeneous and that the condition of liberty is the balancing of social powers and the powers of government by the nobility – the sense in which nobility embraces the best citizens of an egalitarian democracy.’²⁶ This was written before the issues of multicultural identity were put on the agenda, but whether one calls it a composite elite or a heterogeneous social order, the dilemma is identical to that proposed by life on the terms of multiple public identities. It is among other reasons why we should commend Robert Wokler in suggesting Montesquieu’s postmodern affiliations.²⁷ In denying the relevance of the claims of an alleged Enlightenment abhorrence of difference, Wokler relies on Montesquieu whom, he suggests, ‘was at once the Jacques Derrida and the Julia Kristeva of the eighteenth century.’ Largely because of its devotion to themes of difference and otherness, ‘his work [is] the epitome of post-modernism in the Enlightenment.’²⁸
Sharon Krause has argued that honour plays a legitimate role in liberal political thought and that Montesquieu is the principal theorist of its contribution. However, pride of place for rediscovering and developing this element in Montesquieu’s thought goes to Elie Carcassone whose long-neglected – or if not neglected, abused – 1927 work *Montesquieu et le problème de la constitution française au XVIIIème siècle* now fits in nicely with the efforts of these other authors. His is the central text to any liberal interpretation of Montesquieu. For Carcassone, honour allows Montesquieu to solve a central dilemma of governance, to balance obedience against the duty of independent criticism. ‘With ingenious capriciousness,’ Carcassone argues, ‘honour conciliates independence and fidelity: it commands service to the prince, and prohibits treason; but it inspires when necessary generous resistance.’ Honour provides ‘an *illegal means* of maintaining the law’ (my emphasis). ‘Disobedience was a normal element of the monarchical state.’ Respectful disobedience was more than exceptional personal conduct; it had become an essential element in the constitution of every large-scale non-despotic polity.

If we look at the unlikely alliance that was effected in the 1750s between Montesquieu and Francois Richer, we can see how the argument of *L’Esprit des lois* had practical effects. François Richer was a lawyer in the *Parlement de Paris*, a spokesman for Jansenist religious causes (though not personally Jansenist), a protégé of the famous parlementaire ideologue Louis-Adrien Le Paige, and simultaneously not only a disciple of Montesquieu, but his editor. In Richer we have both the view from the Parisian street and the affiliation with a supposedly detached Olympian of the High Enlightenment. Richer’s hand is the one at work in the index to *L’Esprit des lois*, which we assume was done with Montesquieu’s approval. When we read the index heading under ‘parlement’ – which is where we look to find the central thrust of The Spirit of the Laws as an ideological argument – we find any number of subversive surprises. I mention only one. The last line of Richer’s index entry under *parlement* simply says, ‘see legislative bodies,’ and then refers the reader to *Laws* XI.6, which famously describes English representative government. On Richer’s subtle promptings, Montesquieu’s immanent critique of the French state showed how the *parlements* could be unified and transformed into a British Parliament.

Had that been the case, would not the French monarchy have become a republic? No, no more than Montesquieu thought that England was a republic. The opening lines of the chapter that immedi-
ately follows the famous chapter 6 of Book 11, which describes the English Parliament – England’s most republican institution – refer back to that chapter in calling England a monarchy despite its representative dimension (Laws XI.7, p. 166). England was on some accounts a republican monarchy (‘the republic hides under the form of a monarchy’ [Laws V.19, p. 70]), but a monarchy, nevertheless, still standing in need of the very separation of powers that defines a monarchy more than a republic. As the authors of this volume’s Introduction point out, there was no clear-cut distinction between republic and monarchy when it came to describing actual governments.

If Montesquieu’s understanding of the republic was couched in terms of its overcommitment to public life, his understanding of monarchy suggests undercommitment. The monarchy was generous about the particular ‘differences’ that could be accommodated within its territory, differences that from the republican perspective might detract from public duty. Monarchy was characterized by social differentiation and not moral unity. This was a relatively new theoretical possibility. Honour was a procedure by which communicative agents tested and adjusted their loyalties over time; it lacked a permanent substantive content as it was subject to the changing understandings of divided sub-communities within the nation.

Many of the objections to L’Esprit des lois came from groups (ecclesiastical and others) who thought that monarchy required a deeper ethical consensus. Montesquieu’s idea was that only the republic had a sufficiently thick consensus to invoke the idea of virtue as its guiding force. This was not a satire on dysfunctional monarchy, as some have suspected, but a sign of the philosopher’s liberal intentions. Monarchy – a sufficiently reformed monarchy – would create a tolerant society. Montesquieu holds out a libertarian hope (or for a tutelary moralist, a nightmare prospect) for release from surveillance and for decriminalizing private behaviour in a society whose centrifugal energies would see people regarding one another not with an eye to seeking conformity but with eyes wide open to every possibility for distinguishing themselves.

What Montesquieu wished to stress about republics – as did Rousseau – is their commitment to equality. Equality is admirable, but its implementation requires a mutual surveillance that is simply not required or is optional in monarchy. The inequality characteristic of monarchy is its weak point, but this should permit a greater degree of freedom from official surveillance. One can see where Tocqueville got his conviction that there was a trade-off between liberty and equality.
Tocqueville gained one other lesson from a reading of Montesquieu. Both aristocrats had an esthetic admiration for grandeur in politics. This is why Montesquieu’s libertarian praise of the multiple freedoms cited in the title could be misleading. His monarchical political actors were not unencumbered individualists; they possessed far too great a communitarian spirit. This is the larger meaning of a politics of honour. It is filled with reverence for the political community – whose ultimate symbol in monarchy was the throne – on whose behalf one acts: ‘as [under monarchy] each one has so to speak a larger space, he can exercise those virtues that give the soul not independence, but greatness’ (Laws, V.12).

Is this attraction to the noble gesture what might reconcile liberal individualists to the larger purposes of a historical community, as only a community or communities can applaud and record or repudiate and disavow the noble or ignoble deeds of individual actors? Or does the esthetic liberalism of the aristocrat seduce its democratic adherents, as it did its monarchical ones, into projects of glory and empire that go beyond what liberals should countenance?

Notes

3 Burke, Reflections, 31–2.
6 Burke, Reflections, 31.
Parlements were quasi-judicial, quasi-legislative bodies whose officers had inherited or bought their positions. Venality, or treating the office of judge as property, had the odd effect of guaranteeing life tenure to the judiciary two centuries ahead of the British. These courts included the Parlement de Paris, the most important, and eleven (or at some points in the century, fourteen) others, including the Parlement de Bordeaux, where Montesquieu once occupied the position of président. These bodies had considerable regulatory powers, the ability to arrest, the duty to maintain roads, academies, and universities, and to supervise public morals, including the surveillance of literature and the theatre. But these were also royal courts and expected to register the king’s edicts. Their occasional refusal to do so gave them bargaining power and raised hopes that parlements might become an even greater counterweight to royal authority.

For a burgeoning sociability that grew into the rudiments of civil society in France, see Daniel Gordon, Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670–1789 (Princeton 1994); Mona Ozouf and François Furet, ‘Two Historical Legitimations of Eighteenth-Century French Society: Maby and Boulainvilliers,’ in François Furet, ed., In the Workshop of History (Chicago 1982), 139.


12 Montesquieu, Spicilege 604, Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu, ed. by Roger Caillois (Paris 1951), vol. 2, 1390.

13 See Montesquieu, Considerations on the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline, chs. 16, 18.


17 See Laws XIX.27.

18 For more on this dimension of Montesquieu’s thought, see Michael Mosher, ‘The Judgmental Gaze of European Women: Gender, Sexuality, and the Critique of Republican Rule,’ Political Theory 22 (1994): 25–44.
24 G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. by Allen Wood (Cambridge 1991), par. 273, ‘constitutional monarchy is the achievement of the modern world,’ 308; ‘we must recognize the depth of Montesquieu’s insight ...’ 310; but honour falls short of ‘objective duty,’ 311.
PART II

Enlightened Christian and Millenarian Monarchisms
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Monarchy functions in the *New Science* of Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) as a desirable and needed remedy for an extreme malady, namely, the refined, impious, solipsistic, and reactive individualism of ‘modern,’ democratic man. Framed within his ‘rational civil theology of divine providence,’ Vico’s account of Caesar Augustus serves as the prime example of the means whereby an exhausted form of life is stunned and overcome in favour of another that is once again pious and open to growth and development. Monarchy in Vico is thus Providence’s way both of ending government by the people, wherein individuals are unrestrained in appropriating the public good for their own profit, and returning fallen men to fear and piety and the proper pursuit of their private goods.

Like any of the forms of government which Vico describes, monarchy is not a good in itself. He does not consider who governs to be important, but how the ruler governs, whether it be an aristocracy, democracy, or monarchy. Vico is a realist, not a republican, and, though Rome is always on his mind, he does not share the warm nostalgia felt for the Roman Republic either by his ancient hero Tacitus or by his Renaissance hero Machiavelli.

Part 1 of this essay sets out some important features of Vico’s account of Caesar Augustus as the instrument of Divine Providence. Part 2 describes how that account fits into Vico’s theory of mythopoieisis, that is, the creation of myth expressed in imaginative universals.

**Part 1**

Vico’s explanation of the fall of the Roman Republic is new in the final version of the *New Science* of 1744. His answer is that republican Rome
fell precisely because of the political liberty and philosophical enlightenment that it had achieved:

But as the popular states became corrupt, so also did the philosophies. They descended to skepticism. Learned fools fell to calumniating the truth. Thence arose a false eloquence, ready to uphold either of the opposed sides of a case indifferently. Thus it came about that, by abuse of eloquence like that of the tribunes of the plebs at Rome, when the citizens were no longer content with making wealth the basis of rank, they strove to make it an instrument of power. And as furious south winds whip up the sea, so these citizens provoked civil wars in their commonwealths to fall from a perfect liberty into the perfect tyranny of anarchy or the unchecked liberty of the free peoples, which is the worst of all tyrannies.8

Monarchy is the remedy for those times when religion yields to sceptical reason and the natural equality of pleonastic men. This turn of events is in accordance with the ‘two great lights of natural order,’ namely, ‘that he who cannot govern himself must let himself be governed by another who can,’ and ‘that the world is always governed by those who are naturally fittest.’9

In this light, we see that, though it is itself an historical artefact, mature reason, when once conscious of itself and its operations and results, is a weak and derivative force, unable to withstand or control the energies and passions which lie beneath the surface of political life. Thus, the advent of Augustus occurs not through conscious, concerted political action, that is, not by legislation or through a social contract, but as the result of the working of a ‘natural royal law,’10 a felt necessity, such as the Roman jurist Pomponius11 described in the phrase: Rebus ipsis dictantibus, regna condita.12

Vico states the circumstances that make monarchy inevitable and desirable:

This natural royal law is conceived under this natural formula of eternal utility: Since in the free commonwealths all look out for their own private interests, into the service of which they press their public arms at the risk of ruin to their nations, to preserve the latter from destruction, a single man must arise, as Augustus did at Rome, and take all concerns by force of arms into his own hands, leaving his subjects free to look after their private affairs and after just so much public business, and of just such kinds, as the monarch may entrust to them. Thus are the people saved when they would
otherwise rush to their own destruction ... As the citizens have become aliens in their own nations, it becomes necessary for the monarchs to sustain and represent the latter in their own persons.\textsuperscript{13}

Vico explains the character of the Augustan monarchy by recalling the situation which made it necessary. It was the inferiority of the plebeians as a social class which made monarchy the necessary outcome of a protracted struggle between them and their social superiors, the aristocrats, that is, the \textit{eroi} or heroes, who believed they were the direct sons of the gods they worshipped. These heroes ruled their families as despots, served as the state’s priests, elected their kings, and entered into chaste and stable marriages due to the shame they felt before their gods.\textsuperscript{14}

While the heroes were the first men as such, there existed outside their society those who had not yet exited from the bestiality which followed the degradation of mankind following the Flood.\textsuperscript{15} Life among these figures, the \textit{bestioni}, was based on the right of might, so that the weak among them fled to the heroic heads of families, the \textit{patres familias}, for protection. The heroes accepted these men as \textit{famoli} (from the Latin \textit{famulus}), that is, as sub-human servants, impelled by interest only, lacking gods and participation in all the social institutions that follow from heroic religion, that is, marriage (and thus the right to bequeath property), burial, and divination through the taking of the auspices. Friendship within the family and especially the servitude of the ignoble \textit{socius} are thereafter the twin bases and motors of social development, as the patricians strive to maintain \textit{mores} in the face of plebeians’ constant demands for \textit{leges}. Indeed, for Vico, the genius of the aristocratic commonwealth of the Roman Republic was the constant stimulus to military valour (and thus civic honour) which the aristocrats gave to the plebeians by withholding from the latter the same rights they themselves enjoyed. ‘Peoples are likely to conduct themselves heroically in war if in peace they compete among themselves for honors, some to retain them, others to win the merit of attaining them.’\textsuperscript{16}

The motive force in Vico’s explanation of the fall of the heroic kingdoms, the demise of human, that is, democratic, government, and the rise of monarchy is the restless drive of the plebeians as a social class:

At first men desire to be free of subjection and attain equality; witness the plebs in the aristocratic commonwealths, which finally turn popular. They then attempt to surpass their equals; witness the plebs in the popular commonwealth, later corrupted into commonwealths of the powerful. Finally,
they wish to put themselves above the laws; witness the anarchies or unlimited popular commonwealths, than which there is no greater tyranny, for in them there are as many tyrants as there are bold and dissolute men in the cities. At this juncture, the plebs, warned by the ills they suffer, and casting about for a remedy, seek shelter under monarchies. This is the natural royal law by which Tacitus legitimizes the Roman monarchy under Augustus, ‘who, when the world was wearied by civil strife, subjected it to empire under the title of Prince.’

Vico thus explains the rise of Augustus in terms of centuries of class warfare: ‘The weak want laws; the powerful withhold them; the ambitious, to win a following, advocate them; princes, to equalize the strong with the weak, protect them.’

The character of oppression suffered and ultimately overthrown by the plebeians determines the character of monarchical rule:

Now in free commonwealths if a powerful man is to become monarch the people must take his side, and for that reason monarchies are by nature popularly governed; first through the laws by which the monarchs seek to make their subjects all equal; then by that property of monarchies whereby sovereigns humble the powerful and thus keep the masses safe and free from their oppressions; further by that other property of keeping the multitude satisfied and content as regards the necessities of life and the enjoyment of natural liberty; and finally by the privileges conceded by monarchs to entire classes (called privileges of liberty) or to particular persons by awarding extraordinary civil honors to men of exceptional merit (these being singular laws dictated by natural equity). Hence monarchy is the form of government best adapted to human nature when reason is fully developed.

More specifically, succeeding to the rights and forms of the aristocrats but unable to understand universals because they lack the experience of ‘poetry,’ the plebeians desire laws for every particular case. This explains why, beginning with Augustus, the Roman emperors made innumerable laws for private cases, a practice which spread over all Europe as its sovereigns received the body of Roman and canon law into their kingdoms and commonwealths.

Similarly, taking umbrage at the splendour of the nobles, the emperors devoted themselves to promoting the rights of human nature, common to plebeian and noble alike, thereby levelling the population and
undermining the hauteur of the aristocracy. Augustus, for example, extended the benefits of trusteeships to those otherwise incapable of inheriting except through the kindness of fiduciary heirs; he made such bequests binding upon the heirs. The emperors further weakened the power of the aristocratic fathers by making military service more attractive to the lower classes, who could not fight without pay, through the *peculium castrense*. They also made service in the imperial bureaucracy more attractive through the *peculium quasi castrense*. Then, for those sons of the lower classes who were neither soldiers nor clerks, they devised the *peculium adventitium*. They relaxed the rules of adoption to include relatives at greater remove than before.

The master stroke of Augustus’s policy, however, was to take upon himself only the *potestas tribunicia*, the power of the plebeian tribune, who had never had *imperium*, that is, the constitutional, administrative, legal, and military power of senior magistrates in the republican hierarchy. In this way, Augustus safeguarded his *imperium* by calling it the tribuniciain power.²²

At length, the emperors began to show leniency even to slaves and to restrain the ferocious cruelty of their masters; they extended the efficacy of manumission and diminished its formalities. Citizenship, which foreigners and subject peoples had zealously fought for over the span of centuries, now was extended to all those born at Rome and finally to all free inhabitants of the empire.²³

Moreover, the reigns of Augustus and the other emperors were marked by certain characteristic features or styles. Thus, just as Pindar arose when the Greeks admired the display of ‘pompous bravery’ during the games held at Olympus, ‘in the same way Horace came in the most sumptuous times of Rome, under the reign of Augustus.’²⁴

*The Barbarism of Reflection*

The benefits of monarchy in ages of enlightenment are shown in those cases in which free and dissolute peoples either do not find anyone to whom to subject themselves or are not subjected to a foreign power. For their extreme ill, Providence has an extreme remedy:

For such people, like so many beasts, have fallen into the custom of each man thinking only of his own private interests and have reached the extreme of delicacy, or better of pride, in which, like wild animals, they bristle and lash out at the slightest displeasure. Thus no matter how great
the throng and press of their bodies, they live like wild beasts in a deep sol-
titude of spirit and will, scarcely any two being able to agree since each fol-
lows his own pleasure or caprice. By reason of all this, providence decrees 
that, through obstinate faction and desperate civil wars, they shall turn 
their cities into forests and the forests into dens and lairs of men.

In this way, through long centuries of barbarism, rust will consume the 
misbegotten subtleties of malicious wits that have turned them into beasts 
made more inhuman by the barbarism of reflection than the first men had 
been made by the barbarism of sense. For, the latter displayed a generous 
savagery, against which one could defend oneself or take flight or be on 
one’s guard; but the former, with a base savagery, under soft words and 
embraces, plots against the life and fortune of friends and intimates.

Hence peoples who have reached this point of premeditated malice, 
when they receive their last remedy of providence and are thereby stunned 
and brutalized, are sensible no longer of comforts, delicacies, pleasures 
and pomp, but only of the sheer necessities of life. And the few survivors in 
the midst of an abundance of things necessary for life naturally become 
sociable and, returning to the primitive simplicity of the first world of peo-
bles, are again religious, truthful and faithful. Thus providence brings back 
among them the piety, faith and truth which are the natural foundations of 
justice as well as the graces and beauties of the eternal order of God.25

The providential course which the nations run thus ends with a 
return to new possibilities of cultural production. And, through it all, 
the motive force is religion and the social forms to which it gives rise, as 
they are protected or sought after in the struggle for recognition which 
Vico postulates:

For in this work it has been fully demonstrated that through providence 
the first governments of the world had as their entire form religion, on 
which alone the family state was based; and passing thence to the heroic or 
aristocratic civil governments, religion must have been their principal firm 
basis. Advancing then to the popular governments, it was again religion 
that served the peoples as means for attaining them. And coming to rest at 
last in monarchic governments, this same religion must be the shield of 
princes. Hence, if religion is lost among the peoples, they have nothing left 
to enable them to live in society: no shield of defense, nor means of coun-
sel, nor basis of support, nor even a form by which they may exist in the 
world at all.26
Part 2

Providence brings about this recourse to new possibilities of cultural production, just as it had set the nations on their varied courses in their beginnings. And, the motive force behind this cyclic process is the creation of myth, for with myth come the generative ideas which, at the outset of its existence, determine any people’s characteristic possibilities. These it works out over its history with greater and greater clarity and rational elaboration until finally they are exhausted and the people arrives at the unchecked liberty of greedy individuals, whose outcome is either monarchy or the barbarism of reflection, as we have seen.

Myth is Vico’s master key to understanding culture, and culture is written in history. This is why his was among the first voices raised in his intellectual milieu against the pretensions of Cartesian methodology and Enlightened science for their failure adequately to deal with historical data and the demands of practical life. Vico denies that the realities of human life could be accurately conceived according to Descartes’ ideas about substance and mathematical certainty, and he finds in human creativity the fundamentum inconcussum which answered the Frenchman’s criterion of indubitability. Vico’s response to Leibniz’s science of physics and logic was a new science of ‘philosophy’ and ‘philology,’ framed within the Humanists’ earlier response to Aristotelian science, as represented by the school of Padua. This, proclaims Vico, provided a more accurate and adequate explanation of human agency.

Anti-Descartes

The basis of Vico’s response to Descartes is the indubitability of our power to create a world not given in the first instance by nature and, as its maker, to understand that world better than the natural world.

But in the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and never failing light of a truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind.

His epistemological principle derives from the relation of maker to product, or in this case, the relation of teller to tale:
Our Science therefore comes to describe at the same time an ideal eternal history traversed in time by the history of every nation in its rise, development, maturity, decline and fall. Indeed we make bold to affirm that he who meditates this Science narrates to himself this ideal eternal history so far as he makes it for himself by that proof ‘it had, has and will have to be.’ For the first indubitable principle posited above is that this world of nations has certainly been made by men, and its guise must therefore be found within the modifications of our own human mind. And history cannot be more certain than when he who creates the things also narrates them.35

Vico, accordingly, wonders that philosophers should have given their attention to a world they did not create and therefore could only grasp incompletely:

Whoever reflects on [this new science] cannot but marvel that the philosophers should have bent all their energies to the study of the world of nature, which, since God made it, He alone knows; that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations, or civil world, which, since men had made it, men could come to know.36

Vico reverses the primacy accorded to mathematical science by Descartes on the basis of its createdness; numbers and mathematical fictions, such as the point, line, and surface, are perfectly knowable because the entity that knows them, namely, man, created them:

Now as geometry, when it constructs the world of quantity out of its elements, or contemplates that world, is creating it for itself, just so does our Science create for itself the world of nations, but with a reality greater by just so much as the institutions having to do with human affairs are more real than points, lines surfaces and figures are.37

And this very fact is an argument, O reader, that these proofs are of kind divine and should give thee a divine pleasure, since in God knowledge and creation are one and the same thing.38

The language of mathematics is reappropriated in this way as one human institution among others, a witness to human creativity.39

Vico thus claims greater certainty for his science of human institutions than for the natural sciences. He locates the origins of its data not in the meditations issuing from the thinker’s study40 but in the needs,
fears, and passions which prompt human action in the ‘first men,’ as he came to understand them.

Anti-Leibniz

A related but slightly different disagreement divides Vico from Leibniz,\textsuperscript{41} for whom the goal of science was a \textit{mathesis universalis}, a hypothetical universal science modelled on mathematics and envisaged by both Leibniz and Descartes. It would find support, says the former, through a \textit{calculus ratiocinator} or formal system of logical inferences, such as realized in modern developments of mathematical logic. Leibniz wanted to see \textit{through} natural languages, with all their artefacts and imperfections, to arrive at a perfectly calculable artificial language of signs, in imitation of the divine act of creation, for, as Galileo said, God wrote the book of nature in mathematics.\textsuperscript{42}

For Vico, the precise analogy between human and divine mathematical intelligence does not lie in the perfect repetition or reiteration of the latter by the former; that is, man is not like God by reason of his capacity for mathematical thought. Instead, the analogy is between the human act of creating such artefacts as mathematics and divine acts of creation, in which to do and to know are the same thing. The world which men can know is the world which men can create, which, as we have seen, is the world of civil institutions, not the mathematical projection of the physical world.

Imagining Nature

For Vico, men gain a speculative grasp of the physical world only through imagination, whereby they are drawn beyond themselves and their bodies into that world, which they cannot understand but only ‘figure’ on the basis of their passions and capacity for poetry, not mathematics or reason:

Man in his ignorance makes himself the rule of the universe; ... he has made of himself an entire world. So that, as rational metaphysics teaches that man becomes all things by understanding them (\textit{homo intelligendo fit omnia}), this imaginative metaphysics shows that man becomes all things by \textit{not} understanding them (\textit{homo non intelligendo fit omnia}); and perhaps this latter proposition is truer than the former, for, when man understands, he extends his mind and takes in the things, but, when he does not under-
stand, he makes the things out of himself and becomes them by transform-
ing himself into them.\textsuperscript{43}

In ignorantly and imaginatively applying the markers of his own corporeal identity to the natural objects around him, man thereby transfers his own ‘corporeal imaginary’ to a world he otherwise cannot know, thereby becoming its master in and through the terms which his imagination supplies:

It is noteworthy that in all languages the greater part of the expressions relating to inanimate things are formed by metaphor from the human body and its parts and from the human senses and passions. Thus, head for top or beginning; the brow and shoulders of a hill; the eyes of needles or of potatoes; mouth for any opening; the lip of a cup or pitcher; the teeth of a rake, a saw or a comb; the beard of wheat; the tongue of a shoe; the gorge of a river; a neck of land; an arm of the sea; the hands of a clock; heart for center (the Latins used \textit{umbilicus}, navel, in this sense); the belly of a sail; foot for end or bottom; the flesh of fruits; a vein of rock or mineral; the blood of grapes for wine; the bowels of the earth.\textsuperscript{44}

Imagination, not understanding, is the source of meaning in the physical world. Abstract, rational thought, like Leibniz’s formal logic, can only be a late cultural product, a result which comes once the original figuring of the world is worked over, clarified, and exhausted by reason. Only when the affective memory of the original figuring of the world becomes dim does that people need the remedy of monarchy, with its impulses to unity, levelling, and humbling.

\textit{Imagining History}

What is true of the natural world, namely, that it is intelligible only through imagination, is true in greater measure for human history and culture. Here, too, the master key of the \textit{New Science} is the discovery of the primordial situation out of which the rationality of later forms necessarily derives in autonomous developments. Far from having the ordered minds of men representative of mature eras, for example, Plato, the Roman jurists, or the natural law theorists, the men of periods of primordial energy had minds sunk in bodily fears, needs, and awe, lacking certain knowledge of the world which surrounded them.\textsuperscript{45}

The original site of cultural production, such as the primitive ‘men
born from the furrows of Cadmus or the hard oak of Vergil would have known it, turns out to be religious fear deriving from primitive men’s despair and hope: ‘By reason of all this, we must start from some notion of God such as even the most savage, wild and monstrous men do not lack. That notion we show to be this: that man, fallen into despair of all the succors of nature, desires something superior to save him. But something superior to nature is God, and this is the light that God has shed on all men.’

The first heroic poets were thus theologians, whose creations provided the interpretive terms, the imaginative universals, in and through which each people came to understand itself and its world:

In this fashion the first theological poets created the first divine fable, the greatest they ever created: that of Jove, king and father of men and gods, in the act of hurling the lightening bolt; an image so popular, disturbing and instructive that its creators themselves believed in it, and feared, revered and worshipped it in frightful religions.

The first men, the children, as it were, of the human race, had a natural need to create poetic characters, that is, imaginative class concepts or universals, to which, as to certain models or ideal portraits, to reduce all the particular species which resembled them.

In encompassing the world through a spontaneous act of imagination, the first men form universal concepts, that is, they construct a true metaphysics. But it is an imaginative metaphysics, based not on mature reason but fears and needs whose remedy can only be divine. It is a heroic metaphysics, from which the plebeians are necessarily excluded as not having been present at its creation; this fact henceforth determines their social inferiority. Vico agrees with Aristotle that understanding necessarily works on sense impressions, but these cannot be the sensations of conventional empiricism, which omits both the role of Providence in composing individual wills and the freely creative act of man in response to his environment.

Divine providence initiated the process by which the fierce and violent were brought from their outlaw state to humanity and by which nations were instituted among them. It did so by awaking in them a confused idea of divinity, which they in their ignorance attributed to that to which it did not belong. Thus, through the terror of this imagined divinity, they began to put themselves in some order.
The imaginative universal is Vico’s way of explaining the poetic origin of the world and of the interpretive categories whereby each people understands that world and lives out its own destiny.

_The Cunning of Providence_

While the fallen sons of Noah mistake their creations for a true god, their idolatry and the related practice of divination, by which they come to know the future and thus conquer their fear and bolster their hope, are the means by which God rules the fallen world of mankind:

All the things here discussed agree with that golden passage of Eusebius [i.e., Lactantius] on the origins of idolatry: that the first people, simple and rough, invented the gods ‘from terror of present power.’ Thus it was fear which created gods in the world, not fear awakened in men by other men, but fear awakened in men by themselves. Along with this origin of idolatry is demonstrated likewise the origin of divination, which was brought into the world at the same birth. The origins of these two were followed by that of the sacrifices made to procure or rightly understand the auspices.\(^{54}\)

In fear of the god(s) he creates, man becomes aware of his social nature and is made willing to sacrifice for the common good, albeit under the compulsion of awe for a god or gods both cruel and false. In this way, divine providence preserves human life in the variety of gods men propitiate:

Our new Science must therefore be a demonstration, so to speak, of what providence has wrought in history, for it must be a history of the institutions by which, without human discernment or counsel, and often against the designs of men, providence has ordered this great city of the human race. For though this world has been created in time and particular, the institutions established therein by providence are universal and eternal.\(^{55}\)

It is in uniting the universal and the particular by way of imagination that a science of human institutions is possible: ‘Now since this world of nations has been made by men, let us see in what institutions all men agree and always have agreed. For these institutions will be able to give us the universal and eternal principles (such as every science must have) on which all nations were founded and still preserve themselves.’\(^{56}\)

The institutions of divination, marriage, and burial are the necessary
and sufficient conditions of that minimal society which can outlive its founders and lead to the elaboration of the distinctive patterns given at its mythic birth. Vico thus denies that culture had common origins and instead develops a multiple-independent origins theory of culture, making the question of diffusion unavoidably problematic:

Uniform ideas originating among entire peoples unknown to each other must have a common ground of truth. This same axiom does away with all the ideas hitherto held concerning the natural law of the gentes, which has been thought to have come out of one first nation and to have been received from it by the others. This error was encouraged by the bad example of the Egyptians and Greeks in vainly boasting that they had spread civilization throughout the world. It was this error that gave rise to the fiction that the Law of the Twelve Tables came to Rome from Greece. If that had been the case, it would have been a civil law communicated to other peoples by human provision, and not a law which divine providence instituted naturally in all nations along with human customs themselves. On the contrary, as it will be one of our constant labors throughout this book to demonstrate, the natural law of the gentes had separate origins among the several peoples, each in ignorance of the others, and it was only subsequently, as a result of wars, embassies, alliances, and commerce, that it came to be recognized as common to the entire human race.

Human institutions give evidence as to the variable factors that obtained at their birth. Through scrutiny of their present properties, we may verify what a people’s nature or birth was in statu nascendi:

The nature of institutions is nothing but their coming into being at certain times and in certain guises. Whenever the time and guise are thus and so, such and not otherwise are the institutions that come into being. The inseparable properties of institutions must be due to the modification or guise with which they are born. By these properties we may therefore verify that the nature or birth was thus and not otherwise.

Not abstract rules or principles but shared understandings, congealed into forms of public common sense, are the true motive forces of public morality, resulting from a people’s communal life together over time:

Human choice, by its nature most uncertain, is made certain and determined by the common sense of men with respect to human needs or utili-
ties, which are the two sources of the natural law of the gentes. Common sense is judgment without reflection, shared by an entire class, an entire people, an entire nation, or the entire human race. Vulgar traditions must have had public grounds of truth, by virtue of which they came into being and were preserved by entire peoples over long periods of time. It will be another great labor of this Science to recover these grounds of truth — truth, which, with the passage of years and the changes in language and customs, has come down to us enveloped in falsehood. A language of an ancient nation, which has maintained itself as the dominant tongue until it was fully developed, should be a great witness to the customs of the early days of the world.

Vico applies this insight regarding the birth of institutions to Roman law as the paradigmatic case:

If the Law of the Twelve Tables was customs of the peoples of Latium which came into their use in the age of Saturn and which, though they never ceased changing elsewhere [in Latium], were set down by the Romans in bronze and guarded with religious care by Roman jurisprudence, then this Law is a great witness of the ancient natural law of the gentes of Latium.

The charge that Vico brought against the natural law theory of Grotius, Selden, and Pufendorf, with their claims regarding Roman antiquities, was that it was anachronistic and to that extent wrong:

The three princes of this doctrine [of the system of natural law of the gentes], Hugo Grotius, John Selden and Samuel Pufendorf, should have taken their start from the beginnings of the gentes, where their subject matter begins. But all three of them err together in this respect, by beginning in the middle; that is, with the latest times of the civilized nations (and thus of men enlightened by fully developed natural reason), from which the philosophers emerged and rose to meditation of a perfect idea of justice.

As applied to political theory, this meant the overthrow of the rationalist theory of the origins of the gentile state in a social contract based on the prudential considerations that made sense to enlightened philosophers of the Age of Reason. They had failed to unite the true and the certain, that is, philosophy and philology: ‘The philosophers failed by half in not giving certainty to their reasonings by appeal to the authority of the philologians, and likewise ... the latter
failed by half in not taking care to give their authority the sanction of truth by appeal to the reasoning of the philosophers.\footnote{67} The task of the New Science is thus to unite the certain knowledge of institutions gained by grammarians, historians, literary critics, that is, ‘philologians,’ with the rational truths of metaphysics, known to ‘philosophers.’ Knowledge is not to be gained through languages, that is, by way of an analysis of formal structures common to all languages, but in languages, that is, in the very words, metaphors, and similes which bear the traces of original cultural production. Both the truth of philosophy and the certainty of language have a common origin in history as the record of human creativity and expressivity.

To summarize: the human world comes into being as a result of primitive man’s confused and awestruck encounter with nature, not as his world but as that of the god(s) whom he unwittingly creates. The entity that then makes history can also understand history, and this making occurs within a social context, whose characteristic forms and customs are thereafter determined by the circumstances attending its origins. It is by making his gods that natural man makes himself and the social world, and this making is poetry. It is in this sense that Vico calls the ancient Roman law of the patres familias a serious poem.\footnote{68} The circumstances under which that poem was written made certain outcomes both possible and necessary. Thus, while each people has a type of political leader like Augustus, it was the experience of the Roman plebeians that determined the necessity of his rise and the character of his rule.

The new science is Vico’s response to all those across the centuries who denied or called into question the centrality of religion in human affairs. Through it, against determinism, he vindicates human freedom in that mythopoieisis is a spontaneous product of human imagination, though admittedly under the compulsion of strong emotion. He locates the meaning of history in human fear and the constant and recurring operations of Divine Providence, which always brings about its own purposes through the interests and passions of the unwitting and ignorant. As he says: ‘That which did all this was mind, for men did it with intelligence; it was not fate, for they did it by choice; not chance, for the results of their always so acting are perpetually the same.’\footnote{69}

The conclusion Vico draws from this investigation of the historical origins of institutions counters the scepticism that he found in such modern authors as Hobbes and Machiavelli, though he would not be less realistic than they, only more pious: ‘To sum up, from all that we
have set forth in this work, it is to be finally concluded that this Science carries inseparably with it the study of piety, and that he who is not pious cannot be truly wise.\textsuperscript{70}

Conclusion

The figure of the ‘great man,’ he who ‘doth bestride the narrow world like a colossus,’\textsuperscript{71} has exercised great force over the imaginations of those who have considered him. The \textit{locus classicus} is Plato’s account in the eighth and ninth books of the \textit{Republic}, and it must have been present to Vico’s mind as he considered the role which Caesar Augustus played in bringing about the end of republican democracy and in installing monarchical rule. For Plato, this turn of events, while unavoidable, is a disaster and a great refutation of the value of lives lived in pursuit of anything but philosophy; his ideal of the philosopher-king surpasses even the ideal of civic honour, much less interest or the appetites. For Vico, the great man is a saviour in that he remedies a condition which the people themselves cannot cure, and thereby prevents them from falling into an even worse malady, namely, the barbarism of reflection. Plato’s purpose in the \textit{Republic} is to teach virtue, the perfection of human character that can make one worthy to rule, and this can be accomplished, famously, only through the suppression of those passions which the poets are expert in evoking. Vico’s purpose in the \textit{New Science} is to show the poetic origins of the human world and its forms of intelligibility. While, for Plato, the downward course which cities run takes its origins in the evident failure of the philosopher-kings fully to fashion the sensible world along the ideal lines which they know are best, for Vico, the explanation is the working of Providence in history, bringing about the framing of the world through a spontaneous act of imagination on the part of fallen men. As Löwith says: ‘[Vico] neither replaced providence by progress, like Voltaire, nor introduced, like Bossuet, orthodoxy into history. When he investigated history as a philosophical historian, he never intended to discard revelation; and, when he asserted, from the first to the last page, that providence is the first principle for the understanding of history, he did not distort the sociopolitical history by an eschatological viewpoint. His leading idea is neither the progression toward fulfillment, nor the cosmic cycle of a merely natural growth and decay, but a historicocyclic progression from \textit{corso} to \textit{ricorso} in which the cycle itself has providential significance by being an ultimate remedy for man’s corrupted nature.’\textsuperscript{72}

Caesar Augustus provided Vico with the prime example of the bene-
fits of monarchy when sceptical reason has led to popular government by overthrowing the fear and piety which Providence instils in men to keep them virtuous.

Notes


2 For an introduction to Vico, see Peter Burke, Vico (New York 1985). I would like to express my thanks to Prof. Burke for a most stimulating and illuminating discussion of these issues in the incomparable atmosphere of the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies.


5 Vico consistently distinguishes the material and false, though very useful,


8 NS §1102.

9 NS §1005.

10 ‘Una legge regia naturale’; see NS §29.

11 Sextus Pomponius was a jurist in the era of Hadrian and the Antonines.

12 ‘When the circumstances themselves dictated it, kingdoms were founded.’ See NS §1007, citing Pomponius, Digest 1.2.2.11: ‘Most recently, just as there
was seen to have been a transition to fewer ways of establishing law, a transition effected by stages under dictation of circumstances, it has come about that affairs of state have had to be entrusted to one man (for the senate had been unable latterly to govern all the provinces honestly). An emperor, therefore, having been appointed, to him was given the right that what he had decided be deemed law.’ See also NS §29.

13 NS §1008.


15 Vico safeguards the sacred history of Jews and Christians by denying that Noah and the Hebrews ever suffered the degradation of Noah’s sons, who abandoned their father’s religion and became the founders of the gentile races; see NS §13. Wandering in the great forest, their descendants grew to enormous size, in competition with the great beasts which teemed around them; see NS §369.

16 NS §278. The Roman jurisconsults also played a key role in staving off the plebeians’ demands by strictly construing the ancient, founding laws of the Twelve Tables; NS §281: ‘Another principle of Roman heroism [was] implemented by three public virtues: the magnanimity of the plebs in wanting to share the civil rights and laws of the fathers; the strength of the fathers in keeping those rights within their own order; and the wisdom of the jurisconsults in interpreting the laws and extending their utility little by little as new cases demanded adjudication. There are the three proper reasons for the distinction which Roman law attained in the world.’

17 NS §292, citing Tacitus, Annales 1.1: Augustum ... qui cuncta discordibus civilibus fessa nomine principis sub imperium accepit.

18 Vico intends such figures as the Gracchi and Octavian’s grand-uncle, Julius Caesar.

19 NS §283.

20 NS §1008.

21 See NS §287.

22 ‘Prince’ has for us inevitable monarchical connotations, but the Latin word does not, so we should think of princeps more as ‘first among equals’ (primus inter pares), since it is precisely Tacitus’s point that Augustus subjected the world to himself not as monarch but as restorer of the republic, hence his acceptance of only the tribunician power.

23 See NS §§995ff.

24 NS §909.

There is an evident parallel between the endpoints of both Vico’s ‘barbarism of reflection’ and Max Weber’s ‘routinization of charisma’ (Veralltäglichung des Charisma). And, in fact, Weber borrowed and transferred the concept of charisma from the church historian Rudolf Sohm, for whom the medieval Church and especially its canon law reflected the legalization and bureaucratization of an original outpouring of spirit, the ‘gift of grace,’ as in Paul’s letters to the Corinthians. Thus, with the passage of time, the enthusiasm caused by charismatic experience is ‘cashed in’; mundane concerns predominate, emancipate men from religious fear and piety and set them at odds with one another. But, whereas, for Vico, the iron cage of reified and exhausted forms must be overcome through monarchy or cultural annihilation, for Weber, it is to be borne, as he makes clear in his famous ‘vocation’ lectures.


See Linda Gardiner Janik, ‘The Origins of Vico’s Anti-Cartesianism,’ New Vico Studies 1 (1983): 39–50. Janik relates Vico’s project to Humanists in the sixteenth century who had fought against the logicism of philosophers like Zabarella, who denied that history was an art. In that Descartes merely resumes one side of an old debate against the dignity of history, it is he who is anachronistic, Janik says, and Vico the contributor to a living tradition.
Nicolini suggests that Vico’s distinction between nature and history is inspired by Latin authors’ distinction between res divinae and res humanae, except that here it supplies the basis for an absolute historicism (storicismo assoluto). Nicolini is likely referring to Varro’s lost Antiquitates rerum divinarum et humanarum, whose organization is known to us through the fourth book of Augustine’s De civitate Dei.


See NS §349. By including mathematics within his science, Vico subjects it to the same law of three stages, from divine to heroic to human, evidenced in all human institutions.

In describing the ‘divine pleasure’ that his ideal reader will experience in ‘recreating’ the original circumstances of cultural production, Vico evokes the thought developed by Cusanus and Ficino that man is a second creator of the world.


The Third Meditation of Descartes is a classic expression of this solitary philosophical ideal.


See Apel, L’idea, 304, quoting Galileo’s Considerazioni al Tasso.

Prof. Burke’s assertion seems well founded that the thinking of which Vico speaks takes place in the minds of the peoples whom the historian studies, but not in the historian’s mind; see Burke, Vico, 78ff. The historian must recapitulate that history in the same terms as those who lived it, though he or she does not perform this task through the imagination but through the understanding. See NS §§338 and also §378. Thus, understanding comes about through a process by which given texts and artefacts are reconceived

46 This is a reference to Cadmus’s founding of the city of Thebes by sowing the teeth of a serpent he had killed. As he did so on the advice of Athena, armed men sprang up from the teeth and fought one another until five were left. These five became the ancestors of the noble Thebans. See NS §541.


48 NS §339 and also §§179ff.

49 NS §379.

50 NS §209.

51 See NS §363.


53 NS §178.

54 NS §382.

55 NS §342.

56 NS §332.

57 Bergin and Fisch use the Latin word *gentes* to translate Vico’s *genti*, which signifies the birth community of a set of institutions which develop over time through that community’s members’ life together. See Bergin and Fisch, Introduction to *NS*, xxff.

58 Generally, the history of ancient Rome furnishes the bulk of Vico’s historical data; on this debt, see Pietro Piovani, ‘Il debito di Vico verso Roma,’ *Studi Romani* 17 (1969): 1–17.

59 NS §144ff.

60 NS §147ff.


62 NS §§141ff.

63 NS §§149ff.

64 On the theoretical impasse which Roman antiquities pose for Vico, see Lilla, *Vico*, 104ff; but cf. 154ff.

65 NS §154.

66 NS §394.

67 NS §140.

68 NS §§1027ff.

69 NS §1108.
This refers, of course, to Julius Caesar, but nothing in Vico’s thought would prompt us to distinguish between him and his grand-nephew. The ascension of either as monarch comes about not because of qualities in the individual but because of circumstances beyond his control. It results from the ‘natural royal law’ and the working of Providence, as it brings about the conditions that allow the great man to draw to himself the desires and allegiance of the people and in this way bear their person.

Condillac did not have the destiny, nor probably the desire, to frequent the royal court in Paris or Versailles. Born to a noble but provincial family from Grenoble and embarking on an ecclesiastical career (eventually becoming an abbé), the young Etienne Bonnot de Condillac could only draw attention to himself for his intellectual qualities in Parisian salons, especially that of Madame de Tencin. He did, however, have the opportunity to experience court life, albeit a court in miniature. It happened that he was called by Louise Elisabeth, daughter of Louis XIV and wife of Philip, Duke of Parma and Piacenza, to take charge of the education of the duke’s heir, Ferdinando. The monumental result of this experience was Condillac’s *Cours d’études*, a veritable encyclopedia of the new ideas of the Enlightenment. Condillac spent nine years (1758–67) at work on this set of books, first published in 1775. From a pedagogical point of view, Condillac’s time in Parma was a failure because the prince was dimwitted and refractory. It should also be noted that, although the *Cours* was supposed to contain everything needed for the education of a prince, it did not contain sections that were exclusively about politics. This was because, as Condillac repeated many times, it was deemed that the heir could advance more easily in knowledge of the art of government by studying history (to which a large part of the *Cours* was dedicated) than by means of theoretical teachings. It is not surprising therefore that political reflection in general and thoughts about monarchy, the court, and political-religious questions are found throughout the sections entitled ‘Ancient History’ and ‘Modern History’ – to the point of constituting a coherent doctrine, a sort of politics *in nuce* contained in history (e.g., the long treatment of law in chapter 8 of the fourth book of ‘Ancient History’).
The Other Side of the Century of Louis XIV

In Condillac’s history, life at court was represented, without flattery, as detestable. ‘I learned from Fronton that the court is the home of envy, lies, hypocrisy, and how little to rely on the affection of the great’:2 these are the words Condillac takes from the Memoirs of Marcus Aurelius to teach his pupil the importance of not trusting his courtiers. He could also see in the life of that philosopher-emperor that it was possible to live ‘without luxury, without pomp, without guards, to live like a private man and still maintain the dignity of one who commands’ (XIII, 302). It should be noted that this ethical condemnation, influenced by Stoic moralism, colours Condillac’s very realistic coverage of different aspects of courts throughout the centuries. In general, Condillac insists on the vices and corrupting effects typical of courts: the ‘false idea of glory’ that is found at the basis of ‘intrigues’ is a chief cause of the ‘injustice of most wars’ (X, 399). The court is described as a little circle in which the ‘despot’ is permitted to ‘consult nothing but his caprices,’ acting ‘for himself’ (X, 445). The examples he selects are not chosen to reassure his reader about the possibility of an enlightened king who might prevent the degeneration of courtly life. The portrait that the philosophe traces of the court of Emperor Constantine is no less ironic than scandalized: ‘It seems that after Constantine the emperors did not think themselves great except as measured by the numbers of valets they employed around the palace’; ‘there were a thousand food service officials, as many barbers, more singers, and the eunuchs were uncountable’ (XIV, 278–9). Except for the eunuchs, it would be tempting to believe that Condillac meant to extend this critique to his own times as the basis for judgment of the French monarchy. There are no direct allusions, but evident opportunities for comparison to the great feasts of the court of Louis XV, and, of course, to the court of his predecessor.

The pages dedicated to Louis XIV lash out in irony, in contrast to the favourable picture that Voltaire had given of that king and his era. The childhood and youth of Louis XIV are stamped with ‘frivolous amusements’ that dominated the occupants of the court. ‘He was twenty years old and occupied himself with nothing but dances, masquerades, tournaments, comedies, hunts, games, and intrigues of love’ (XIX, 436). From the moment he took up the reins of government, Louis XIV fell under the influence of flattery, at which his ministers excelled. They ‘accustomed him so much to praise that, although once convinced of his ignorance, at which he sometimes joked, he began to believe that he
naturally had all of the talents of his estate’ (XIX, 437–8). Unlike the ministers the king listened to, Colbert fell because ‘he did not praise the king enough’: ‘too great to flatter his master like Le Tellier and Louvois,’ Colbert found himself, at the end of his career, out of favour with the king (XIX, 438). All of the politics of the king, domestic and foreign, were subject to the nefarious play of personal influence, driven by the people nearest the king. Condillac notes scrupulously that if Colbert’s reforms led to a noticeable improvement in the economic and financial conditions of the state, this was counterbalanced, even annulled, by the disastrous consequences of the power politics indulged in by the king, and which the author attributes to the influence of the court. If he had listened to Colbert’s advice, he could have been, despite his innate limits, a good sovereign: ‘If Louis XIV had been more enlightened, he could have put all of his glory into benefiting his people, but he did nothing but use his power to disturb the peace of Europe.’ It would have been enough, for that purpose, ‘to listen to Colbert, study with him, and let him do things.’ Once again it was the court that was responsible for encouraging the less positive inclinations of the king: ‘his courtiers would speak of nothing but his power, and kept it before his eyes at all times.’ The ceremonies of the court encouraged a politics based on fraudulent notions such as ‘power’ and ‘glory,’ which could be summarized, Condillac notes, in the idea of ‘grandeur.’ It was manifested especially in ‘magnificent festivities’ which the king ‘gave frequently to his court, at which he appeared with a majestic air, as if he were master of the world’ (XIX, 440–1). But behind the appearances, the true result of that politics could be described as a ruinous situation, both for the debts of the state and for the impoverishment of the nation.

Louis’ ambitions led to contradictory results. Imagining himself ‘a conqueror,’ he ‘thought himself powerful, because Spain was weak.’ Not having ‘any other ambition than to secure his frontiers and render himself redoubtable,’ in fact, the result was that he ‘spread alarm among his neighbors,’ making ‘all Europe arm itself against him.’ It is important to note that this judgment, openly unfavourable from the political point of view, is not compensated for in Condillac by a more positive view of the cultural life, which constituted the merit of the century of Louis XIV and his hegemony for Voltaire. There is no reference to Louis XIV in the pages dedicated to the progress of the human spirit in the 1600s in the ‘art of reasoning’ or in high culture. Given that evaluation, it is not surprising that when, passing from history to political pedagogy, Condil-
lac gives a quick look at the court of Rome with its dissension between priesthood and empire. Our abbé puts the reader on guard against the feeling of omnipotence that the artificial atmosphere of the court provokes in sovereigns: ‘All courts will teach you [here Condillac addresses the heir to Parma directly] where ambition without limit will take you, when a prince feels authorized to do anything by his flatterers’ (XVI, 408–9).

‘Everything Must Be Redone’

Closer inspection of the vicious principle that causes the degeneration of courts makes us recognize, with Condillac, that we are dealing with two basic institutions of the monarchy of the Ancien Régime: the distinction of nobility and the principle of rule by divine right. It is striking that the violence of Condillac’s attack on these two reveals how close his work is to the more celebrated Discourses of Rousseau.3

His initial criticisms do not apply to the nobility in general, but to the specifically French form, which Condillac traces to its origins in the Gauls and Franks. The necessity of ruling over a people made up of ‘many nations, which could not be governed by the same laws’ led the inhabitants of Gaul to mix different laws, to combine opposites, giving an impression of incoherence at the origins of the history of French institutions. Condillac responds by advocating an authentic and radical reform: ‘The laws must be redone, the governments must be redone, everything must be redone’ (XV, 90). Of the unsuccessful parts of this ‘shapeless construction’ (throughout the Cours he calls the feudal regime a ‘monstrous government’ [XV, 407]), Condillac does not hesitate to place in the first line the hereditary nobility. Besides the inequality of wealth, feudal government instituted a disordered and chaotic hierarchy in which the ambitions of the lay nobility, the pretensions of the clergy, and the religious orders crossed each other. The body of the nation was in continual convulsion. ‘Since there are so many classes, and so much inequality among them, should it surprise us that interests multiply and cross each other continually? But a nation is not truly civilized unless it forms a body of citizens united by common interests’ (XVI, 391). Attacking the feudal nobility of the Middle Ages, the abbé is actually reaffirming the classical idea of aristocracy as the best men. That condition is not hereditary, and should be limited to distinguishing those who have served their country, encouraging emulation ‘without changing equality.’ ‘In these families as in any other one is born as a
simple citizen, and birth does not confer any title, any privilege, any
right’ (XVI, 391). It is noted that during the late Roman Empire the
most splendid titles began to be hereditary in some families, but even
the territorial nobility of the Middle Ages is resolutely criticized by the
abbé philosophe. In the feudal epoch the nobles lived in fortified castles
like brigands: ‘one was born noble,’ Condillac writes, ‘because one was
born a brigand’ (XVI, 392). ‘The nobility that a family gets from its
land, without having rendered any service to the state, is certainly the
most absurd of all prejudices. It is also the principle of the most hateful
inequality’ (XVI, 393–4). The attack did not spare the great, since in
barbarous centuries ‘the least civilized men,’ ignorant as savages, brutal
and greedy, ‘are without doubt those whom we call great’ (XVI, 396). It
is tempting to find in this phrase, written twenty years before the French
Revolution, a prophetic allusion to the destiny of those great men. Con-
dillac predicts that ‘they will be destroyed before they are civilized
because the confidence that they place in violence does not permit
them to feel the need for laws, and the flatterers that surround them
permit them even less to feel the need to acquire enlightenment’
(XVI, 397).

Nevertheless, we should not credit our philosophe with a prophetic vir-
tue that he did not aspire to and which is very far from his empiricist
philosophy. But if one can doubt that Condillac would have been able to
consider radical reform of the nobility of the Ancien Régime which he saw
in triumph at the court, at Paris and Versailles as much as at Parma, it is
ture that he considered it not only possible but valuable to demolish the
other column on which the court ideology rested, the absolutism of
divine right. In one group of chapters which deal with political theory,
Condillac tenders an apology for ‘moderate monarchy’ in which one is
‘truly free’ (X, 428) because the laws, and above all ‘fundamental laws,’
‘regulate the use of sovereign power,’ excluding ‘all arbitrariness’ (X,
413). That which characterizes the despot, on the contrary, is ‘that he
puts his will in the place of the laws, and does not recognize the funda-
mental laws that should serve him as a rule’ (X, 418; cf. 428). It is worth
observing that while Condillac shows himself somewhat sceptical of
Montesquieu’s theme of the balance of powers (X, 425), he reserves a
great deal of hostility for Rousseau’s democracy. From the moment that
‘sovereignty is in the people as a body ... [it is] subject to all of the
caprices of the multitude,’ to the point that such a government ‘neces-
sarily goes from revolution to revolution and is finally lost either in anar-
chy or servitude’ (X, 421–2; cf. 478).
The Ideal of Enlightened Monarchy

Condillac’s ideal is moderate monarchy. He asserts that democracy tends to degenerate into demagogy, and Hobbesian theory is reduced by Condillac to a sort of despotism, in which the king is conceived of as ‘a power of arbitrary law, without limit, and where his mere will has the force of law’ (XX, 503). Where he orients himself to Grotius in international law and Montesquieu in political theory, Condillac does not even mention Rousseau (XX, 499–506). His enlightened monarchy is the opposite of both courtly flattery and Rousseau’s polemic against the arts and sciences. The legitimacy of the paradox of his Genevan friend is excluded from the beginning: ‘to ask if the sciences are useful is to ask if there is any benefit in being enlightened: the question does not merit a response’ (XX, 500). The chapter dedicated to showing the utility of the sciences, is in effect, a synthetic view of the progress of the human spirit in which knowledge and the arts of government go hand in hand. After the ‘light’ of the Greeks and Romans, the ‘night’ begins with the reign of Constantine, and the ‘light’ only begins again to progress constantly in the sixteenth century, when it ‘will not stop spreading’ and will ‘eventually enlighten all the nations’ (XX, 531). It is evident to Condillac that one should not confuse the true enlightenment of enlightened monarchy with the false luminosity of courts like Versailles. Asking the capital question of the philosophy of the eighteenth century, ‘Which will be the happiest century?’ Condillac answers with habitual clarity: ‘the century in which princes are enlightened enough to place limits on their power, and to recognize that wars ruin both victors and vanquished in the long term: a truth that Europe should recognize’ (XX, 532). One could not express a clearer condemnation of the whole policy of the Sun King.

We are now in a position to understand the message of the definition of the word ‘court’ that Condillac gave in his Dictionary of Synonyms. Also composed for the use of Ferdinando of Parma, the definition stayed close to the historical genesis of the phenomenon of the court, and in particular to its medieval and feudal stage (with all the negative that this period had in Condillac’s eyes). A long way from evoking the greatness of Versailles, it is especially the bad habits of subjects and vassals that come to mind with the word ‘court’: ‘Space surrounded by walls that makes part of a habitation ... vassals rendering duty to their lord would attend him in this court. From there [the meaning is transferred] to his castle, and to paying court, or rendering hommage. Voilà the origin of
meanings of this word as the place the king inhabits, the king in his
council ... the people that live around him, and the magistrates that ren-
der justice in his name."4

Religious Ideology and Ecclesiastical Power

The will of God, for Condillac, is manifested not in the choice of a sover-
eign, but in accordance with the tradition of natural law it is expressed
‘above all in the natural law, of which God is the sole legislator’ (X,
510). Social contract doctrine is enough to dismantle any theory of a
divine right, and Condillac followed social contract theory explicitly,
although with differences from Rousseau’s version.5 The ‘conjectures’
that Condillac advances about the ‘power of the first monarchy’ sug-
gest that the first kings were ‘heads of their families’; thus, a figure as
important as Nimrod in the Bible was no more than a ‘chief hunter,’ ‘a
chief that led his equals’ with their consent against wild beasts. In that
period men, ‘threatened with ruin by common enemies [...] did not
dream of dominating over others’ (IX, 28–31). The first monarchies
were ‘weak,’ their power was limited to that of a chief and father, and
their authority was as small as their estates (IX, 51). In Condillac’s view
agricultural peoples did not try to conquer others, unlike pastoral peo-

cles, who became ‘the first conquerors’ (IX, 55). Roman history in the
Cours d’études would merit a separate study because it gives an example
of social dynamism and a hard class struggle so that at a certain moment
the principatus appeared to offer the citizens of Rome a choice of peace,
even if they had to renounce liberty.

The real turning point in the history of the ideology of monarchy
came not during the course of ancient history, but in ‘modern’ history
(or more exactly medieval history), when the representation of the king
changed decisively. It was the Gauls, during the domination of the
Franks, who, ‘perhaps out of prejudice, perhaps out of flattery,’ outdo-
ing the German nobility in their adulation, attributed ‘absolute author-
ity to the prince, which he wanted to assume.’ The role of religious
ideology in the advent of absolutism was no less considerable, as Condil-
lac demonstrates in his comments on the function of the bishops in
‘sanctifying’ the power of the king. Not having ‘better ideas on this mat-
ter,’ the churchmen ‘looked in Scripture, and found that they recom-
mended maximum obedience to the authorities.’ But instead of the
simple precepts of obedience in the Scripture (‘one should obey the
laws, and consequently the king and magistrates who interpret them’),
the bishops drew out of the text the evidently excessive maxim that ‘the authority of kings is absolute, arbitrary, and that they have the right to dispose of everything without consulting the laws.’ The application of this maxim was even more false in the case of the king of France, ‘where the kings were not monarchs, but only the heads of the nobility’ (XV, 94–5). The ultimate success of this ideological construction led them to believe ‘that the kings receive all of their power directly from God,’ an opinion which Condillac considers ‘absurd,’ and which he attributes to the ignorance, the servitude typical of ‘policed nations,’ and ‘the ambition of a usurper who, taking advantage of the simplicity of the people, seeks to appear as if he were chosen by God himself’ (XV, 96).

It is therefore to ‘barbarism,’ which covered all of Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire, that Condillac attributes the origins of the doctrine of the divine nature of power. Barbarism grew out of the disorder of feudal government and was carried ‘to its height where the ecclesiastical power cut down the laws which it ought to have respected by its example’ (XX, 498). Condillac’s judgment about the influence of the ecclesiastics is both hard and clear, for example, concerning the Wars of Religion which reveal, in his opinion, the most complete rejection of any enlightened and reasonable policy. It is easy to see that Condillac’s ideal would be a state where politics could be free from all religious authority. Concerning the bloody theological-political conflicts of the sixteenth century, he writes: ‘There was no idea of the law of nature or of nations; there was no trace of public law; one violated faith concerning treaties; one even believed oneself authorized to do so by the Pope ... subjects forgot the fidelity that they owed their prince; the assassination of kings was regarded as pious; and the most monstrous maxims, taught by priests, took the place of a religion that loved justice and peace’ (XX, 498).

An Apology for Toleration

Neither the Cours d’études nor any other of Condillac’s works contains the anti-Christian theses typical of the most radical philosophes. Guerci has underlined the ‘apologetic’ tone of the Cours, for example, in regard to the historical origins of Christianity, describing it as an ‘edifying’ tract of ‘plain and indisputable orthodoxy.’ He stresses that religious toleration is a ‘lesser evil’ for Condillac, inconvenient but better than the ‘greater evil’ of the violent extirpation of heresy. One passage concerning the end of the treatment of Lutheranism at the Council of
Trent is eloquent, a sure indication of the pragmatic attitude of our abbé, showing him to be far from the indifferent relativism of Voltaire: ‘If toleration is an evil, it is a necessary evil every time the blood that one spills instead of destroying error would be nothing but a worse evil’ (XI, 74). But it should be noted that a more favourable light is cast on toleration in places where Condillac confronts the problem of religious pluralism in Europe. Thus, the decrees of the Diet of Augusta on the coexistence of Roman Catholics and Lutherans are described in a simple but clearly approving manner. The Diet, he writes, ‘established toleration in Germany. It was provided that the Protestants would enjoy complete liberty of conscience and all of the rights of the Catholics; and it condemned to punishment all disturbers of the public peace, those who stirred things up for religion’ (XI, 106).

Condillac’s description of the Reformation and its spread conceded nothing to the ‘reasons’ of Luther and, rather, condemned his actions when he went beyond calls for political and moral renewal of the ‘court’ of Rome (which Condillac always judged harshly). Furthermore, Condillac sees an inextricable confusion of religious and political motives in the civil wars in France between Huguenots and Catholics; however, he attributes the origins of the intolerant behaviour which he condemns with no less firmness, to the Catholics. Clearly, it is the negative model of the court, a major theme throughout the Cours d’études, as we have seen, which is for him the source of religious conflict. The reasons for the conflict can be found in the perverse dynamic of the court of Francis I, a ‘gallant court’ of women (XVIII, 125), and ‘beaux esprits,’ where ambitious ‘priestly courtiers’ flattered the king, mostly interested in conserving their temporal privileges and income. Polemicizing against the historiography of the Jesuit Father Daniel, who attributed deep religion and true piety to the king, Condillac denounces the true reasons for intolerance in a passage that could not have been more anticlerical: ‘The ruin of the clergy in the Protestant provinces of Germany alarmed the clergy of France. No doubt there were ecclesiastics who fought against the error on account of a pure and enlightened zeal, but it would not be temerity if one were to suspect that the prelates of the court were acting above all in defense of their customs and wealth. This was the secret motive’ (XVIII, 128).

Condillac concedes nothing to the dogmatic innovations of the Protestants, neither does he concede anything, on the moral plane, to the persecuting conduct of the Catholics and of the prelates of the court that instigate it. ‘If there is no religion without faith in dogma, faith in
dogma is not all of religion: exact obedience to the duties of one’s station is certainly an essential part of it. To praise the piety of sovereigns who violate those duties is to prostitute religion in order to flatter the vices of the great’ (XVIII, 130). Even keeping in mind the didactic purpose of the *Cours d'études*, the comparison between Francis I and Saint Louis (always in favour of the latter) may seem disingenuous. Nevertheless, it serves only to show that the sainted king would have acted very differently and would not have trusted those who would encourage intolerance for their own ends, but would have solemnly reproved the morals of the court prelates: ‘Here, Sir, we have the morals with which the souls of princes are poisoned. I have felt it necessary to bring up this point of Father Daniel, in order to forestall that writer and his parallels’ (XVIII, 131).

This historical evaluation adds the dimension of ethical disapproval to some of the other places in the *Cours* in which Condillac appears to be a bit too pragmatic. It helps us understand his criticism in other passages of later episodes of religious conflict such as the escalation of attacks by Henry II on his great lords and his effort to introduce the Inquisition into France (XVIII, 137 and 142). It also helps us understand Condillac’s praise of people like Michel de l’Hôpital who attempted to ‘reestablish peace in the state’ (XVIII, 143).

Revealing the responsibility of the Guises and the Catholic courtiers does not lead Condillac to unduly and ahistorically idealize the behaviour of their adversaries the Huguenots. Rather, it is once again the negative effect of the court that its intolerance is mirrored by the subversive ‘fanaticism’ of the latter. The interplay between political interests (in the inferior and courtly sense of the term) and dogmatic religious convictions gave birth to the rebellion. ‘The Huguenots would not have revolted if they had not had leaders among the court factions, which would not have started a civil war if there had not been Huguenots’ (XVIII, 139). From the play of similar ‘interested motives’ on both sides, religion became a pretext: ‘each party gave arms to fanaticism in order to immolate the people for their own ambitions,’ ‘the fanatics stirred up enthusiastic people who are so simple to suppose them to defend their religion’ (XVIII, 140). At that moment the choice of tolerance or intolerance became the dilemma, not so much religious as political, between revolt and repression. ‘It was no longer a question of toleration or persecution: there were two enemy nations in the kingdom, and the war began’ (XVIII, 140).

It is at this point that Condillac’s considerations, based on his diagno-
sis of the evils of the court, turn to a motive characteristic of his recon-
struction of the history of the feudal regime, the absence of a true
‘police’ like that of the ancients. One of the traits of medieval ‘barbary’
nearer to anarchy and licence than to true liberty is that ‘the French
have never known that liberty for which the Greeks and Romans so eas-
ily took up arms.’ This was because, except for the era of Louis XI, the
royal power had met no resistance, and princes of the blood would have
submitted to the yoke of the Guises if they had not found, in the perse-
cuted Huguenots, ‘arms ready to serve their ambitions.’ On the other
side, the people acted according to the feudal or ‘modern’ logic,
pushed into revolt by motives that neither a Greek nor a Roman would
have recognized: ‘The heretics believed they were taking arms to defend
their religion and their lives. They did not propose to render themselves
independent, but fanaticism produces wars that are more terrible than
those carried out for love of liberty’ (XVIII, 149).

In synthesis, as Condillac underlines at the end of this subtle and
complex analysis, the historical causality of the period of the ‘troubles’
cannot be found in a single dominant factor, but rather in a complex
weaving of heterogeneous motives: ‘Thus we should not look for the
cause of the troubles only in the factions of the court, or in the mere
establishment of Calvinism in France: it is in all of these together,’ along
with the ‘careless conduct’ of the government under Francis I and
Henry II (XVIII, 149).

In the light of this evaluation, we can understand the open sympathy
with which Condillac regards the regime of toleration in France after
the peace of 1570, and on the contrary, the execration with which he
describes the St Bartholomew’s Day massacre. ‘What did religion gain
from this massacre? But fanaticism is always blind, and those who
directed it did not think of religion’ (XVIII, 238). The apotheosis of the
reign of Henry IV is naturally associated with the Edict of Nantes, by
which the king ‘gave liberty of conscience to the Huguenots and
declared them capable of all offices, employments, and dignities’
(XVIII, 366).

It was appropriate for Condillac to finish this review of the alterna-
tions of tolerance and persecution with the revocation of the Edict of
Nantes by Louis XIV. The event seems to be presented in the Cours
without adequate preparation, right after a description of the absolutist pol-
itics and philo-Catholicism of James II of England. As compensation, it
provides an opportunity for a prudent but effective commentary which
unites the customary profession of orthodoxy with a note of pungent
irony created once again by that inverse teleology or heterogeneity of purposes which, as we have seen, constantly accompanies political persecution. ‘The king wanted to destroy heresy; one can only applaud his zeal; but it must be recognized that the means were not prudent. We can see today what he should have seen himself: that it served neither the Church nor the state.’ In reality, persecution could only produce hypocrisy: the Huguenots who were converted amounted to an imposture and a big lie. And five hundred thousand emigrants took their arts and manufactures out with them, and spread throughout Europe a ‘horror of persecution’ (XVIII, 486).7

From Toleration to ‘Civil Christianity’

In the Cours d’études there are many explicit indications of a prudent, moderate, but clear defence of secular political institutions. At the foundation of Condillac’s history there is an emphatic recognition of the harm produced by a system that tends to ‘confuse the two powers, and which will someday produce great evils’ (XV, 178–9). If in the East the confusion of the two powers resulted in Caesaropapism, in which the political winds up absorbing the religious authority, in the West there is a movement in the opposite direction: ‘The two powers clash in the West because the bishops usurp the Empire’ (XV, 180). Ignoring that the Church was maintained in the first three centuries by the charity of the faithful and that their privileges were derived solely from the civil power, the medieval clergy transformed the situation de facto into a condition de jure, sanctioning it by the pretext of divine law. The prelates ‘owed all of their power to anarchy which eventually confounded all rights, and to superstition, which turned everything upside down. The clergy was ignorant of all of this: that is why bishops and abbés regarded themselves as lords by divine right of their lands. The people, even more ignorant, believed in divine right, and the clergy enjoyed it with no opposition’ (XV, 187).

The passages in this sequence have been well analysed by Guerci8 (also see XV, 278). From the false Donation of Constantine (forged by a monk), to the French kingdom, to the investiture controversy, to the conflicts between the papacy and councils, the Cours d’études returns to these issues many times, and it is enough to consult Guerci’s book for a well-documented picture. Here we shall mention some more general doctrines which constitute the basis for the historical judgments of our abbé philosophe.
‘Adulation’ of the Roman court is an example that the prince should avoid. It becomes more complicated when Condillac draws a lesson about the competences of the prince from the dissensions of the clergy and the empire. In one of the rare instances in which the preceptor addresses the pupil directly in order to give more rhetorical force to his lesson, Condillac writes: ‘Learn what you owe to the state, to religion, to churchmen, to each citizen, to yourself; place each one in his place and take your own.’ The biblical reference to the separate prerogatives of God and Caesar is a strong polemical force against any mixing of prerogatives. ‘Ministers of the Church, kept within their duties, shall be required to render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s, and Caesar will render unto God that which is God’s.’ Beyond that Condillac adds an ulterior principle of discrimination, clearly impregnated with political reasoning, although somewhat elliptical in this context. To the demand for clarity from the pupil there is a clear answer: ‘But what is my place, you ask? You will find it easily if you are the father of your people’ (XVI, 409). Reference to the lessons of the recent history of Europe surely added substance to Condillac’s considerations. It is not difficult to imagine that he thought of them when he alluded to the necessity of studying ‘the disorders which have troubled Europe’ not just for academic purposes, but with evident pragmatic intentions for enlightened reform: ‘untangle the causes, prevent the abuses that cause them to return, destroy those which remain in your state’ (XVI, 409).

This discourse could seem, at first glance, too superficial to have any concrete purposes. To correct this impression, one should remember Condillac’s continual references to the atrocities of the Wars of Religion. For example, the poetic refinement of Ronsard and the Pléiade poets is set off against the ‘horrors’ and ‘crimes’ of the times caused by the ‘fanaticism that stifled all sense of humanity’ (XX, 479). Beyond contingent episodes that throw a sinister light on recent European history, Condillac constantly insists on the negative effects of superstitious religious belief driven by evident political ambitions.

Reviewing historical sources for a correct understanding of politics, Condillac excludes the history of the nations of Asia. They have always been subject to despotism, and their peoples are unable to develop adequate ideas of natural law and the law of nations because they are too bound to customs. ‘Conduct is determined only by customs which usage seems to have consecrated.’ ‘Finally the yoke of superstition, which maintains ignorance, does not allow liberty of thought; the monarch, adored on his throne, knows no other law than his will’ (XX, 490). If the
nexus of superstition and despotism is clearly delineated and, in general, expressed in terms of the nascent category of ‘Oriental despotism,’ it is also applied directly to the European continent. After having shown that the Roman experience, unlike that of the Greek republics, was not favourable to respect for right and law (the dominant category of Roman history is its ‘government constitution oriented to conquest’ [XX, 494]), Condillac observes that the medieval period was even less favourable, characterized by a general obscurity of culture and knowledge. ‘Barbarianism, which began with the decadence of the Roman empire, eventually covered all of Europe.’ It was unthinkable to imagine finding the notions of law and healthy principles of administration among ‘ferocious nations that knew no other law than force’ (XX, 497).

This fatal mixing of feudal government and ‘ecclesiastical power’ provoked the violent excesses of the wars of religion, which Condillac considered to be the consequences of medieval ‘barbarianism.’ It is interesting to note that next to this clearly delineated historical reconstruction Condillac provides more general valuations. In a crucial chapter for the history of the degeneration of ecclesiastical power (‘Of the regulation of the church during the first eleven centuries’), examining the Latin West up to the time of Gregory VII, he declares the intention of forming ‘an idea of the ignorance and disorder which reigned everywhere.’ At this point he passes from the descriptive to the prescriptive to show ‘within which limits [the Church should be limited.’

The surprise contained in Condillac’s text is that the abbé does not limit himself to the customary separatist attitude, evoked in more traditional terms which distinguish the Church from temporal purposes: ‘the safety of citizens, that is, the conservation of their lives and fortunes’ on one side, and the other-worldly ends of Christianity on the other (XV, 433). Condillac also vindicates a large zone of intersection between the two spheres of authority, attributing to Christianity the significance of a true and appropriate ‘civil religion’: ‘those who limit [Christianity] to that single object [the health of the soul and eternal life] speak too inaccurately, and do not have a complete idea of our religion.’ In fact, Christianity, at least as reconstructed ideally by Condillac, ‘also tends to make us citizens: it does not exclude one end to obtain the other; it comprehends them both’ (XV, 433–4). Were this not the case, Christianity would be paradoxically inferior to paganism, of which he underlines the civil and political value. The inference that Condillac draws is the opposite of the type of theocratic religion that is only the interest of the ecclesiastics; it ought to be, rather, the reverse: ‘It is that [the clergy]
should respect the civil laws: they should be the first to give an example of obedience: in a word, they should be citizens, in order to show everyone the path to health’ (XV, 434). The examples which follow show the effective content of ‘civil’ Christianity: negatively, an obligation not to usurp ‘the rights of the people, the magistrates, and the sovereigns’; positively, indicating the ‘political’ purpose of religious beliefs and practices: ‘they are ministers of religion in order to compete to maintain the laws, public tranquillity, and the welfare of the world.’ Thus, it is true that the magistrates could be ‘nullified’ if they were subordinated in civil matters to the ecclesiastics; but it is also true that if these two orders were independent they would be ‘two orders which combat each other without end.’ It is necessary therefore that the ecclesiastics be subordinate in civil matters to the magistrates, ‘because if one can be a citizen without being a Christian, one cannot be a Christian without being a citizen’ (XV, 434–5).

Condillac’s proposal, understood as political regulation of the two powers, does not have any dogmatic or theological intentions; furthermore, it is situated in the terrain of analysis typical of the concept of civil religion. On these counts it is clearly distinguishable from the very different program put forth by Marsiglio of Padua or Jean de Jandun. The latter, combatting the excesses of papal power, ended up at the other extreme, contesting any legitimate papal authority. Condillac’s judgment of the anti-papists’ program, more theological than political, is almost completely negative: ‘falling from error to error, they attacked the dogma because the Popes defended it’ (XVI, 328).

‘Of Progress in Politics’

In reaction to the dark picture just delineated, the epoch of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries appears in Condillac’s Cours d’études as the moment of decisive enlightenment after which none of the religious beliefs that were the principle motors of medieval barbarism could survive: ‘It was a matter of showing the people what they owe to each other, and of combatting the ignorance, prejudice, and superstition that armed them’ (XX, 499).

In Condillac’s text there follow some interesting considerations regarding ‘progress in politics.’ Condillac shows how the diffusion of new light in political science was the result of the works of great authors like Grotius, Hobbes, and Pufendorf, although each of them is valued differently. Grotius receives ample recognition, although his unsystem-
atic manner, lack of method, and the erudition which meant more appeal to authority than to reason are criticized. Despite these criticisms, Condillac’s appreciation is decisively positive: ‘He created a science that would be very useful if it were better known, and he enlightened those who applied it after him with more success’ (XX, 502).

Not so favourable and more strongly critical is Condillac’s evaluation of Hobbes, in whom he finds all of the elements of a thesis favouring ‘despotism.’ Hobbes inclined to see in the monarch ‘a power of arbitrary right, without limits, and where the sole will makes the law’ (XX, 503). Instead, more concise but in compensation more laudatory is the judgment of Pufendorf, to whom Condillac attributes ‘less genius’ than to Grotius and Hobbes, while recognizing an effectively greater success ‘because he took advantage of learning from the errors of both of them, and from their ideas’ (XX, 505). The chapter concludes finally with an admiring reference to Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of the Laws*, evoked to consecrate the progress of the eighteenth century and defined as a ‘work in which there is great vision and a great deal of genius’ (XX, 506). Montesquieu is also the unmentioned but recognizable source of Condillac’s expressed preference for ‘moderate’ or ‘enlightened’ monarchy.

These brief remarks on the literature of political science would merit more study, if nothing else for their intrinsic content. For our topic, it is most interesting to see the programmatic declaration with which Condillac opens chapter XX. It is emphatically part of the progress of politics to have a perspective on the exercise of government that impedes the awful products of ‘fanaticism’ and ‘superstition.’ Although clearly oriented to an economic-social sense, Condillac’s initial observations have a more general import. They are inserted in a series of reflections intended to vindicate the autonomy of the civil powers vis-à-vis the religious powers. Foremost is an affirmation of the principle that confirms the universality of citizenship and the neutrality of the principal political duty: ‘the sovereign owes his protection equally to all of his citizens.’ This protection applies, above all, to the development of the arts and industry, and should not be applied to dominion over opinions and belief. Condillac also emphasizes the concept of general utility as a guide for political action: ‘It is the general utility that the statesman ought always to propose: it would not be just nor prudent to sacrifice it to the utility of some members.’ The latter is part of the polemic against ‘luxury’ that can be found throughout the work of Condillac (XX, 487–8).

At the height of this argument Condillac goes beyond an indirect apology for toleration as the lesser evil, when he affirms the pre-
eminence of the value of a citizenship that actually implies the equality of all subjects, under a power considered neutral regarding the peculiarities of individual people or groups. In economics this neutrality amounted to an explicit liberalism in the spirit of late eighteenth-century *laissez-faire*, according to which ‘statesmen never cause more nuisance than when they get involved in everything.’ Not by chance Condillac concludes that ‘it would be wiser to limit oneself to preventing abuses, and for the rest to *laisser-faire*.’ In matters of religious opinion, as we have seen, his discourse is more complex and amounts to a complete reform of Christianity for civil purposes, according to the principles of Enlightened natural law. ‘Civil status’ ends up being not only a condition for the exercise of political life, but also for the achievement of spiritual objectives to which Christianity, rightly understood, is oriented. For this, Condillac submits, toleration and religious pluralism become matters not only to be valued as lesser evils, but also foundational values for the new enlightened state.

**Notes**

1 This chapter is a new, abridged, and updated version, translated into English, of “Il faut tout refaire”: Condillac critico del dispotismo e defensore della tolleranza,’ in Luisa Simonutti et al., eds., La formazione storica della alterità (Florence 2001), vol. 3, 947–73.

2 Cited from the *Cours d’études* in *Oeuvres de Condillac* (Paris 1798), vol. XIII, 297. Hereafter cited in the text in parentheses by volume number and page. Note that none of the references in this essay are to the book *De l’étude de l’histoire* (included in this set) which was by Condillac’s brother, the Abbé de Mably.


5 For these differences, see Paganini, ‘Le contrat social à la cour’ and by the


8 Guerci, Condillac storico, 267–323.
Two major millenarian works in the middle of the eighteenth century by David Hartley and Bishop Thomas Newton summarize the prophesies that they believed would be fulfilled, leading to the millennium. Both are by learned, modern thinkers. Hartley is usually given credit for founding modern psychological studies, and the bishop was one of the modernists of his day. Each spells out the expectations and events to come as detailed in Scripture, however, without relating them to any eighteenth-century events. They discuss the conversion of the Jews, their return to Palestine, and the rebuilding of the Temple.

In the middle of the eighteenth century, expressions of millenarian expectations growing out of current political events seem to have gone into a decline. One still finds theologians who express the view that the fulfilment of Scripture prophecies is occurring but they do not link this to national rivalries, dynastic struggles, and the like. William Whiston, Newton’s successor in the chair of mathematics at Cambridge University (later expelled from this appointment for denying the doctrine of the Trinity), was investigating each natural disaster to determine whether it was a portent or part of the beginning of the drama portrayed in Revelation, so he was actually considering the latter in light of contemporary events. However, we can see a great change taking place at the end of the century, beginning with the American Revolution. David Austen, a disciple and colleague of Ezra Stiles of Yale University, announced that the Son of Man was born in Philadelphia on 4 July 1776. A minister in New Haven started building ships to take the Jews back to Palestine to prepare for the messianic world that was soon to occur. Scholars such as Stiles and Samuel Johnson, of King’s College (soon to be renamed Columbia), advocated that the language of the new country should be
Hebrew not English, the tyrant’s tongue. Stiles had tried to find out from each successive rabbi arriving at Newport, Rhode Island, if he had any news about when the Messiah was coming. He made Yale into a centre for Jewish studies, while Johnson wanted all the courses at Columbia to be taught in Hebrew. Stiles’s favourite rabbi among the ones that came through Newport was Haym Carigal, who stayed there only a few months and then moved on to become a rabbi in the Bahamas. Stiles corresponded with Carigal and tried to engage him in a discussion about what the millennium would be like. In the large collection of Stiles’s papers at Yale there are many drafts of an essay about the millennium in English and Hebrew. The author painfully tried to translate his English into Hebrew for the benefit of the rabbi. Stiles was worried about whether the natural world would continue operating in its present fashion once the millennium had begun. Would the grass continue to grow? Would animals and people still reproduce? He also was very concerned about whether barriers between humans would be broken down. Would Jews and non-Jews be able to intermarry in the millennium? Rabbi Carigal never commented on any of Stiles’s worries but just told him that his Hebrew was improving and remarked on his grammar. (It is interesting that the intermarriage question was of foremost importance. As we will see, this became all-important to Napoleon’s notion of citizenship.)

The link between biblical and contemporary events took a giant step forward when the French Revolution began. One of the leaders of the American Revolution, Elias Boudinot, the president of the Continental Congress, became extremely excited when the first news about what was happening in France reached him. He, as well as the rabbi of New York, was sure that something of epic-making proportions was taking place, both in the United States and in France, and that this would lead to the re-establishment of the messianic kingdom in Jerusalem. All of this took on even more excited expectation when Napoleon became one of the major actors.

In 1799 when Napoleon set sail for the Middle East, a communiqué was issued in his name in the leading governmental newspaper *Le Moniteur* urging the Jews of Asia and Africa to join him in rebuilding the Temple. When Napoleon arrived in Palestine a rabbinical council was hurriedly called at Khan Younis at the southern end of the Gaza Strip to assess what messianic importance Napoleon’s invasion had. Napoleon had originally intended to camp in Jerusalem but, for better or worse, went to Egypt instead, where he got involved in military politics that...
seemed outside the messianic framework. After he was driven out of Egypt by British forces, the Middle East, especially Egypt and Palestine, became open for European commerce, travel, and investigation. Religious groups, especially British Protestants, starting coming in significant numbers. When he returned to France, Napoleon crowned himself emperor and started a series of campaigns to destroy the kings of the world. In 1806, after his victories against Austria, Germany, and Russia, Napoleon decided to make a major development in Jewish history, namely, reconvening the Sanhedrin, the governing body of the Jewish world. This body, which last met before the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, was, according to Jewish tradition, only to be reconvened by the messiah, who could choose its proper members. Napoleon had people researching the process in the royal library and came up with the plan that he, Napoleon, would call into being an assembly of Jewish notables and they would appoint the Sanhedrin.

In 1806 Napoleon’s researchers came across a volume in the royal library entitled, Du Rappel des Juifs, by Isaac La Peyrère – a book, they said, ‘as curious as it is rare.’ The work had been published anonymously in 1643 by La Peyrère, the secretary to the prince of Condé, who explained that the messiah would soon come, gather up the Jews of the world, bring them to France where they would be reunited with the king, and then taken to Palestine where they and the king of France would rule the world – the king as regent for the messiah. Napoleon obviously liked this picture and had the book described in the official newspaper. In La Peyrère’s version the Jews in France would become members of a Jewish-Christian church that would adopt a form of Christianity with no possible objections that Jews could find. It would be a genuine Jewish Christianity. Napoleon and his advisers apparently saw that the only way something like this could be done would be to reinstate the Sanhedrin. A few centuries earlier a Jewish attempt to do this had taken place in Palestine but failed over the disagreement about who could be a member of the group.

Napoleon saw that the members had to be designated by some authoritative Jewish group, so he established an assembly of Jewish notables; it would be these notables who would then appoint the Sanhedrin. He gave the assembly a set of questions to settle about whether Jews could be full members of a modern, enlightened society. The questions included whether Judaism still believed in polygamy, whether Jews would feel that they were French, whether they would recognize non-Jews as brothers, and so on. The one question that raised hackles was
whether a Jew could marry a non-Jew within Jewish law. This is the only question that gets much debate in the transactions, and an unnamed rabbi is reported to have said, ‘no matter what it costs, let’s tell them the truth, the answer is no.’ Most of the other members decided to be more expedient and to becloud the issue with many distinctions, finally telling Napoleon that if a Jew married a non-Jew in the civil society it could be recognized within the Jewish society. This was enough for Napoleon. He announced that his birthday would be celebrated in the Grand Synagogue in Paris with the assembly of Jewish notables and that he would appoint the Sanhedrin right after that. On 15 August 1806, the celebration took place during which hymns of praise were heaped upon Napoleon, and the future head of the Sanhedrin, Rabbi David Sinzheim, said ‘Oh Napoleon, our redeemer, let Israel build the Temple to you in its heart.’

Napoleon became the messiah-king as far as symbolism stood. It should also be noted that Napoleon had the altar of the synagogue draped with the arms of himself and Josephine and had the standards of his legions placed above the altar and before the Torah. This, he must have known, replicated the very events that triggered off the Jewish rebellion against Rome in the first century and was now being accepted by the Jewish authorities in 1806.

Regardless of whether the Sanhedrin members did this all with tongue in cheek or whether they were serious, this certainly connected current and messianic events in the person of the French emperor. Napoleon apparently got tired of this game, and a year later when the Sanhedrin had made one ruling about a marriage problem he shut down the gathering. They never met again in public though I found some of them kept signing their writings ‘by a member of the Paris Sanhedrin.’ After Napoleon’s fall there was agitation in many religious circles as to what the significance of his career had been. Napoleon excited the rabbinic students around Vilna (Vilnius) when he passed through on his way to Russia. Martin Buber in his one novel, Gog and Magog (originally titled For the Sake of Heaven), describes a group of Jewish scholars who get excited when they first find out what Napoleon is doing and try to fit him into the expected events, the birth pangs of the messiah. Each time they hear of another Napoleonic drama they get more excited, and then in the final scene they hear about Waterloo and are back to page one. A somewhat similar situation existed for various Protestant groups in England who saw Napoleon as a demonic character fulfilling some of the role of the Antichrist, presaging the arrival of
Christ himself. After Waterloo, some of these people began to worry about why there had been no real culmination of divine history on earth.

In the chaos created in Spain by Napoleon’s last campaign there, an amazing work by a Jesuit from Chile supplied a theological framework for interpreting current events in millennial terms. Manuel Lacunza, who was born and raised in Chile and entered the Jesuit order there, was forced into retirement when the Jesuit order was suppressed in 1767. He then moved to Italy, where he devoted himself to intense study of the Bible and the Church Fathers. He completed a work in 1791 entitled, *The Coming of the Messiah in Glory and Majesty*. This book was attributed on the title page to Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra, a converted Jew. It is not known why he did this. The work presented most forcefully the pre-millennial thesis that the second coming of Jesus would occur at the beginning of the millennium along with the Jews’ return to Palestine and the rebuilding of the Temple. Lacunza gave no date for when this would happen but his text gave it an air of real immediacy.

Since his text rejected elaborations of Catholic doctrine from the time of Saint Augustine onward, Lacunza did not attempt to publish it for fear of condemnation by Catholic authorities. However, the work began to circulate almost immediately in manuscript copies in the original Spanish and in Latin and French translations. Because of its very philosemitic text, envisaging the triumphal return of the Jews to the Holy Land, the Jewish community of Venice offered to pay for the publication of the book. Lacunza hesitated because he had not been able to obtain papal approval for the book and so it remained unpublished. However, it began to be studied in the very places where great political changes were taking place.

The abbé Grégoire, a leading figure in the French Revolution from 1789 onward, had a manuscript copy by 1791, which he got from the Bishop of Pavia. Grégoire was, as far as we know, the first person in France to receive a copy of Lacunza’s most impressive and powerful work. Grégoire mentions that Lacunza’s text is one of the finest statements of millenarian thought, and Grégoire kept seeing the millenarian scenario unfolding before his very eyes. His many attempts at reforms were aimed at preparing for the crucial moment, the pre-millennial appearance of Jesus. Part of Grégoire’s reform was to turn the Catholic Church into a constitutional church governed by the political state. He himself was one of the first constitutional bishops and appointed quite a few of the Spanish and Italian ones. As a result there were radical revolu-
tionary church leaders in France, Italy, and Spain, and they seemed to be among those who were reading Lacunza in manuscript. The Jansenists in France, the group that Grégoire allied himself with, published a digest of Lacunza with indications of its applications to current events.

The work remained in manuscript until printed in 1812 in Spain during the Napoleonic invasions. The actual printing of the text occurred as a result of Napoleon’s invasion and the collapse of Spanish authority around Cádiz around 1810. A revolutionary government there shut down the Inquisition and allowed the publication in Spanish of Lacunza’s text. It was next printed in London in Spanish, and a thousand copies were shipped to Buenos Aires. The work figured prominently in the liberal revolution that then took place driving out the Spanish authorities. The work was printed at the very outset of the Mexican Revolution, and has been a source of revolutionary inspiration to this day throughout Latin America. Manuscripts of it exist all over the continent and in Mexico, as well as refutations of it by orthodox Catholic theologians. Lacunza and his work still seem to be part of a revolutionary underground in Latin America. What seems to account for this is that Lacunza portrays the overthrow of the present oppressive regimes as the time for the Second Coming approaches. Lacunza also indicated that the pope was actually the Antichrist who would be overthrown with the return of Jesus and the onset of the millennium. Lacunza’s text seems to have played a role from the time of the liberation movements in South America in the beginning of the nineteenth century down to the present.

If Lacunza’s vision, with its great array of scholarly theological supports, influenced a radical spirit within the Catholic world, it also had a quite amazing influence within the Protestant millenarian world, especially in England and the United States. The Spanish text had been printed in London for shipment to Argentina. It became known to a leading evangelist preacher, Edward Irving, who decided to translate it into English. Irving’s edition was studied by those post-Napoleonic millenarians who were trying to reinvestigate the problem of when the great prophecies in Scripture were to be fulfilled. Lacunza’s elegant presentation, plus Irving’s ardent advocacy, gained a wide audience in England and America. The British Library has a copy with extensive notes by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, notes that have not been sufficiently studied and analysed.

Among Irving’s associates in millenarian discussions was one Joseph Wolff, a Jewish convert who became a self-appointed missionary to the Jews of the Middle East, seeking to convert them. Wolff joined a group
of English theologians studying when the Second Coming would occur. He travelled to America in 1837 and told President John Quincy Adams that it would happen in 1843. Adams wrote in his diary, ‘I think it is a bit too soon.’

A group of serious Protestant speculators meeting at the estate of Lord Drummond went over each prophetic passage to try to figure out which prophecies had been fulfilled, which had not been fulfilled, and how these prophesied events should now be understood. A man named John Nelson Darby studied their discussions and offered what is now called the theory of dispensationalism, namely, that the prophetic fulfilment calendar stopped after the fall of the Temple in 70 CE and was only beginning to be activated again. According to Darby we are now in the last ‘dispensation,’ and the prophetic events will occur in contemporary history culminating with the re-establishment of the Jews in Palestine, the rebuilding of the Temple, and the coming of the Messiah in glory, Jesu-Christus. Darby spent a good deal of his time preaching in America, Canada, and Australia. His efforts spawned fundamentalist preachers and scholars all over America; present-day Christian fundamentalists are almost all dispensationalists. In the early twentieth century they decided to publish many volumes on the fundamentals of Christianity (hence the name fundamentalism). The first two volumes deal with the role of the Jews in the Bible and in the future. The latter, written by some converted Jews, spells out what is now the program of the Christian evangelical movement in the United States.

Lacunza played a role in the movement in the United States headed by William Miller, a farmer from upstate New York, to prepare for the arrival of Jesus in 1843 or 1844. The Millerite movement encouraged hundreds of thousands of members to gather on hilltops to greet Jesus. When Jesus did not show up this became known as the ‘Great Disappointment’ until some new prophetic interpreters, using Lacunza as a guide, found a new explanation. It was claimed that Jesus did, in fact, appear but not in the way the Millerites had expected. He had come down from his throne and was now awaiting the time when it would be appropriate for him to interact with the people on earth. The Seventh Day Adventist movement grew out of this. Ellen White is considered the founder of the Seventh Day Adventists. She saw Lacunza, Wolff, and Miller as heralds of the Advent. Other Protestants who know about Lacunza felt that since he was a Jesuit, and he claimed that the pope was the Antichrist, it gave additional credence to a claim that they had been making since the Reformation.
Because of the influence of Lacunza’s ideas on Ellen White, it is the Seventh Day Adventists who have published new editions of his work and information about his theology. The last English edition is one published in Hollywood, California.8

One effect of this new concern about relating the dramatic events foretold in the Bible with current events was the beginning of a serious Christian Zionist project to gather the Jews around the world and bring them back to Palestine. As earlier mentioned, this idea occurred to a New Haven preacher in 1776 and was being logistically planned. American politician Mordecai Noah, after talking to the Abbé Grégoire in Paris in 1815, tried to set up a Jewish state on Grand Island near Buffalo, New York, where Jews could be gathered to prepare for migration to Palestine as soon as the time had come. In England, missionary societies started going across Europe to Palestine, stopping at Jewish communities on the way to try and get them activated to moving to the Holy Land. The British government was sufficiently excited by this to get involved in establishing an Anglican bishopric in Jerusalem in 1832 so that there would be somebody from the Church of England ready to greet Jesus when he returned. The person chosen for this post was a converted Jew who could talk to the messiah in his native language. The American government appointed an official representative to do the same. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, years before Herzl’s Zionism appeared, Protestant groups in England and America were having conferences about how to get the Jews back to Palestine. A missionary newspaper published in Yiddish in New York listed each Jewish person who set foot in Palestine to encourage others to do the same. There was tremendous excitement among the Christian Zionists in the United States at the end of the First World War when British General Allenby took over Jerusalem from the Turks. The Holy Sites had now been rescued from the infidels, and the British government had issued the Balfour Declaration saying that they looked with favour at the establishment of a Jewish homeland. And so it was that for the first time since Napoleon, at the end of the First World War millenarian speculators could actually deal with the physical events taking place in Palestine as part of their scenario. From the establishment of the British Mandate until 1948, whatever happened could be studied in terms of where it fit in the millenarian scenario. As the American millenarian writer Hal Lindsay said, ‘Israel is God’s timepiece.’ He claimed one could accurately judge where we were in the last dispensation moving towards the messianic age by the very events taking place in Palestine/Israel. This
Christian Zionist fervour for rebuilding the Jewish state in Palestine has continued ever since. As soon as Herzl published his work he was joined by an Anglican minister who was enthusiastic because of the imminent return of the messiah. The present alliance of millenarian Christians with the actual state of Israel grows out of this earlier drive to see the biblical expectations realized on earth.

In 1988, I asked a leading Jesuit advocate of liberation theology about the intellectual background of this movement. He told me that it came out of Joachim de Fiore in the thirteenth century, Antonio de Viera in the seventeenth century, Manuel Lacunza in the eighteenth century, and some more recent theologians. He also told me (we were having this discussion at the University of Central America in San Salvador) that the kingdom of God was emerging in the mountains of Morazon in El Salvador. Similar views were expressed by the leaders of the revolution in Chiapas, Mexico. Bishop Samuel Ruiz of Chiapas explained that the Kingdom of God was emerging in the forests around them. The immediacy of the divine events was no longer just speculation. In both cases revolutionary action was involved as well as biblical scenarios.

The Protestant side of Lacunza’s influence still goes on through the Seventh Day Adventists. Not only is he taken very seriously in their historical accounts of themselves, there seems to be some linkage between what goes on in the state of Israel and some splinters of the Seventh Day Adventists. David Koresh, of Waco notoriety, made at least two trips to Israel, and his mother insisted on getting an Israeli flag to wrap around his body before she buried him. The latest sign of Lacunza’s legacy in action was in 1989. I was in Buenos Aires and wanted to look up some of the manuscripts of Lacunza that are listed in the Seventh Day Adventist literature. A leader of the original Argentinean revolution, Francisco Hermogenes Ramos Mexia, had some manuscripts for which I got the call numbers from some Seventh Day Adventist accounts. I went to the National Library in Buenos Aires to see them. The head of the library told me they could not find them because the place had been sacked several times during revolutions but that I could get them in Chile. He advised me not to write to the chief librarian at the library in Chile because the subject was too delicate. Instead, he gave me his home address and said I could use his name. I never followed up on this to learn what sort of secret studies were going on about Lacunza. The Argentine librarian was excited that I knew of a Lacunza manuscript
that had belonged to Mexia, who is still a great hero of the liberation movement.

Fifth Monarchy thinking took on a new lease of life starting with Lacunza, namely, seeing the prophetic events as actual events going on in contemporary history, especially connected with the return of the Jews to Palestine. As a closing vignette on this, the late premier of Israel Menachem Begin became a good friend of the Reverend Jerry Falwell. Begin, who was often called the ‘king of the Jews’ by his followers in Israel, came to the United States to receive the Jabotinsky medal. He was met at the airport by Mr Falwell, who escorted Begin in a limousine to the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. This friendship between an Israeli leader and American fundamentalist has blossomed into a happy alliance between those who are trying to make the Jewish state bigger and stronger, and those who think this will lead to the appearance of the king-messiah and the Fifth Monarchy.

Notes


2 The leading scholar on Lacunza’s life and work is a French-Swiss Adventist, Alfred-Félix Vaucher, who has been publishing scholarly work about Lacunza, as well as pamphlets in French and Spanish summarizing his achievement. See Alfred Félix Vaucher, *Un célébrité oubliée Le P. Manuel de Lacunza y Diaz* (1731–1801), new ed. (Collanges-sous-Salève 1968).

3 It is not clear where it was printed. See Vaucher, 26–7.

4 London, 1837. Irving was an important millenarian preacher who stirred up much excitement in England and Ireland about the possibility of the Apocalypse occurring very soon.


6 Wolff was a convert from Judaism who played an active role in conversionist societies. He married the daughter of Lord Drummond, who was a central figure in the English prophecy movement, and at whose home annual confer-
nces were held to try to date when all biblical prophecies would be fulfilled and Jesus would return.

7 On the use of Lacunza’s ideas by the early Adventists, esp. by Ellen Harmon White, see Vaucher, 132–4, and Vaucher, Lacunza, Un Heraldo de la Secunda Venida de Cristo (Mountain View 1970), 60–1.

8 This edition, entitled A Nevi, Antichrist, comprises extracts from Lacunza’s work; it was published in 1929.
PART III

Defending and Resisting Absolute Monarchy
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In Copenhagen in the 1750s a small Swiss republic of letters established itself with the support of leading ministers of the Danish government. Its members provided a new basis and new possibilities for disseminating information outside Denmark about the Danish state, its politics, and its history.

*Lettres sur le Dannemarc* was the title of a book by André Roger published in Geneva in 1757. Roger was a diplomat who was born in Switzerland, but at the time living in Copenhagen. The *Lettres* were translated into Danish immediately, and a German translation followed a year later. In 1762 the book was brought out in London under the title, *The Present State of Denmark*. An anonymous editor introduced the English edition with this statement: ‘A Book written concerning a monarchic state by a republican of Geneva, will probably excite the curiosity of others, as it has done mine.’

As a private secretary to the prime minister of Denmark, Count J.H.E. Bernstorff, Roger had arrived in Denmark in 1752, the same year that the Swiss historian Paul-Henri Mallet was called to Copenhagen as professor of French. While Mallet devoted his time to the journal *Mercure Danois* and the study of Scandinavian history,¹ Roger undertook to collect material for his description of Denmark ‘in relation to Its Government and Laws, Its Trade and Manufactures, Its Revenues and Forces.’²

Roger presented the case for Denmark in the first sentences of his first letter, which was addressed to the counsellor of law in Geneva: ‘Sir,
it is doing great injustice to the constitution of this country to say it is despotic. The monarch possesses, indeed, the sole authority; but his administration is one of the most moderate and regular in the world. If by despotism is understood unlimited monarchy, the constitution of Denmark is certainly despotic. But this idea alone is not what affrights your free, republican soul.

The abuse that eastern princes made of their unbounded authority, Roger presumed, would, of course, frighten a republican soul, but with some help from Montesquieu, Roger draws the principal lines which mark the boundaries between monarchy and despotism; and these marks you may easily distinguish in the government of Denmark. It is founded on a system of laws that regulates the administration of justice in civil and criminal affairs.

Having rescued the government of Denmark and Norway from the evils of barbarism and despotism, Roger ended this letter with a comment on the historical origins of unlimited monarchy in Denmark-Norway: ‘It is a gross mistake to imagine that the revolution of one thousand six hundred and sixty, destroyed the liberty of a kingdom which had hitherto been free. Liberty, properly speaking, was known only to the nobility ... Hence you may conclude, that the revolution which deprived the nobility of such odious exemptions, in fact did nothing more than change the principles of a vicious aristocracy into those of a well-regulated monarchy.’ Thus, with the revolution of 1660 in Denmark, so Roger informed his reader, stable monarchism replaced the evils of aristocratic and unbalanced monarchism.

The revolution of 1660 refers to the actions of the Assembly of Estates which was summoned after Denmark-Norway was defeated by Sweden. War with Sweden, and the crisis it provoked, had brought the privileges and rights of the nobility into question while at the same time bringing to the fore the demands of the burghers of Copenhagen for certain rights. The Crown was not slow to exploit this crisis to its own advantage. Under pressure from the burghers, and with the threat that force might be employed against the nobility, the estates were persuaded to agree to transfer unlimited power to the king. What was unique, however, in European terms was that the revolution led to a constitution that defined the new form of government in law: This was the Lex Regia of 14 November 1665, which emphasized on several occasions that the assembled estates had transferred power to the Crown and that, consequently, sovereignty now resided solely with the king, who was subject only to the will of God. Following a summary presentation of the laws of Denmark, the Lex Regia appears as letter no. 10 in Roger’s book.
A supplementary second volume of *Lettres sur le Dannemarc* was published by Roger’s cousin Elie-Salomon-François Reverdil in Geneva in 1764. Reverdil had joined Copenhagen’s Swiss circle in 1758. He edited the *Mercure Danois*, and from 1766 he was a tutor to the Crown prince (who, in due course, became King Christian VII). In his later writings Reverdil defined himself as a republican. How did he defend monarchism?

Taking the same point of departure as Roger did in the first volume, Reverdil distinguished monarchism from despotism, however, not only by the rule of law. He quoted Machiavelli’s *Libre del Principe*, chapter 9 ‘del Principato civile,’ about the prince who rules by the consent of the people: ‘Celui qui devient souverain par la faveur du peuple doit se maintenir dans son amitié, ce qui lui sera facile; car la peuple ne demande qu’à n’être point opprimé. Un Prince qui n’a pas son peuple pour ami n’a aucune ressource dans l’adversité.’ Reverdil pointed out that, as with the political situation in Denmark, the alternative to monarchism by popular consent was oligarchy, even tyranny: ‘l’Etat Oligarchique, c’est-à-dire la plus rigoureuse des Tyrannies.’ Because the power of the government originated from the people, the kings of Denmark aspired to the common good: ‘Le bien public est donc le terme du pouvoir qu’ils ont & de celui qu’ils veulent avoir.’

Nicholas Henshall, in his attack on absolutism as a political myth, came as close as possible to the political interpretation of monarchism in Denmark-Norway as formulated by Roger and Reverdil:

If we start the Danish clock in 1661, we behold a strong monarchy aggressively seizing new powers and apparently launching on ‘absolutism.’ If we start it in 1648, we encounter a weak, elective monarchy with a council of magnates imposed upon it. There is nothing intrinsically ‘absolutist’ about a king wanting to choose his own servants and bequeath the crown to his heirs. The stress on absolute power was, at least partly, a rhetoric of recovery.

There were thus one type of legitimate government (monarchy) and two perversions of it (despotism and republicanism).

By the middle of the eighteenth century the absolutism of Denmark-Norway obviously felt compelled to legitimatize its monarchism. Why did monarchism in Denmark-Norway need this apology against despotism? Why did it seem essential to defend this form of government throughout Europe?
The Intervention of Robert Molesworth

On the title page of *The present State of Denmark* it was pointed out that the description that would follow was ‘Different from any Account hitherto published in the English Language.’ It was clear that nobody should mistake the book for just another reprint of Robert Molesworth’s 1694 publication entitled *An Account of Denmark as it was in the year of 1692.*

As is the case with most travel accounts, Molesworth’s book was as much about the author’s country England as it was about Denmark. He used the factual knowledge of Denmark, acquired during his tenure as English envoy in Copenhagen at the court of Christian V, as a contrast with what he called English liberty:

Want of *Liberty* is a Disease in any Society or Body Politick, like want of *Health* in a particular Person; and the best way to understand the nature of any Distemper aright, is to consider it in several Patients, since the same Disease may proceed from different Causes, so the disorders in Society are best perceived by observing the Nature and Effects of them in our several Neighbours: wherefore *Travel* seems as necessary to one who desires to be useful to his Country, as practising upon other men’s Distempers is to make an able Physician ... And this [*Travel*] can be done by no Nation in the World so commodiously as the *English.* (Preface, a2)

Molesworth’s intentions can be ascertained from his long, general introduction on the theory of the state (from which the quotation above is taken). He examined what he found to be the total incompatibility of absolutism with civil liberty – *public liberty* – as he called it. This liberty was laid down in the Bill of Rights, which had just been formally secured. ‘All *Europe* was in a manner a free Country till very lately’ – that is, the ‘people’ could elect its king or government – ‘Yet ’tis to be remarked that the ancient State of *Europe* is best preserved in *Italy* even to this day, notwithstanding the Encroachments which have been there made on the *Peoples Liberties*; of which one reason may be, that the *Republicks* which are more in number and quality in that Spot of ground than in all Europe besides, keep their *Ecclesiasticks* within their due bounds.’ (Preface, b4)

But Denmark had lost its original liberty, Molesworth contended, and in a particularly alarming way: The ‘popular representation’ (the Assembly of the Estates, which Molesworth calls the Parliament) had voluntar-
ily given up its sovereignty, and thus paved the way for the yoke of slavery. For Molesworth this sovereignty was inalienable and the transfer of power by the Assembly of the Estates therefore invalid:

That the people can no more part with their legal Liberties, than the Kings can alienate their Crowns: That nothing which even the Representative Body of the People does, which shall afterwards tend to the detriment of the universality can then be obligatory ... That the acts of one general Parliament, though a free one, are not perpetually obliging, since that as well as particular persons is liable to mistakes; but the acts of an eternal Succession of Parliaments, who make, confirm, change, or repeal Laws at their pleasure.12

Thus, ‘rights’ and ‘public liberty’ and ‘peoples liberties’ had been abolished in Denmark, according to Molesworth’s perspective, which can be described as an English monarchist version of ‘civic republicanism.’13

Against this general background, Molesworth presented a description that is quite predictable – but interesting for the details – of the monarchism in Denmark, where the only positive exception from the general misery is to be found in the chapter Of the Laws, Courts of Justice, where he wrote: ‘Some naturalists observe that there is no Plant or Insect, how venomous or mean soever, but is good for something rightly applied ... Hitherto we have indeed met with many things in it [Denmark] to be avoided, and little deserving imitation: but being now to speak of the Danish Laws, I must needs begin with this good Character of them in general; that for Justice, Brevity and Perspicuity, they exceed all that I know in the World.’14 Perhaps there was no public liberty, but there was justice.

Molesworth’s book quickly became a standard work on Denmark – outside Denmark.15 Rejoinders appeared in English, French, and German,16 but the predictable blanket rejection is not interesting. The effect of Molesworth’s criticism was more ‘silent.’ His book became an invisible presence in the discourse of political theory in eighteenth-century Denmark. His attack exposed a painful inability to provide a consistent refutation, in terms of political theory, of the claim that Denmark was a despotism. On the face of it, one could only adduce pragmatic historical arguments, unless one clutched at the counter-argument that Molesworth himself had pointed to – justice.

Occasionally this silence was broken. When Montesquieu’s L’Esprit des lois appeared in 1748, in Denmark a remarkable debate arose on
whether, according to Montesquieu’s book, Danish absolutism was despotism, or could be counted among the monarchies. If Montesquieu, like Molesworth, regarded Denmark as a despotism, then of course, the book had to be rejected. The oversensitive reception of Montesquieu in Denmark was the result of the Molesworth inheritance.

The Discourse of Monarchism in Denmark-Norway before 1770

The Continental tendency to focus on natural law, as expressed in Samuel Pufendorf’s *De Jure Naturæ et Gentium* (published in Lund 1672 and 1694), was the most important source of inspiration for political theorists in Denmark in the early eighteenth century. Pufendorf argued that civil society and civic freedom depend on security and justice, that is, the protection through law of the individual and the common good, and are quite independent of the formal structure of government – although monarchy was his preferred form of government.

The philosopher and historian Ludvig Holberg adapted and abridged Pufendorf’s natural law theory into Danish in 1716. Although Holberg adorned his title page with the names of Grotius and Thomasius as well as that of Pufendorf, his book almost exclusively followed Pufendorf’s *magnum opus*, collated with Pufendorf’s shorter *De Officiis homines et Civis*. In the fifth chapter of Part Two of Holberg’s summary of natural jurisprudence, we find the general political theory and a specific historical account of the origins of the state, which is deduced from the theory of two pacts.

Holberg’s version of Pufendorf’s two pacts must be read in terms of the historical context in which it was written in Denmark. The first, which took mankind out of ‘the historical state of nature,’ thus resulted, in Denmark, in monarchism. The general political theory of the second pact consists of the definition of sovereignty: ‘The ruler binds himself by such a contract to attend to the common good, and the others to obey him, and subject their wills to his will.’ In the Danish context for Holberg, the second pact was represented by the transfer of unlimited power in 1660 by the Assembly of the Estates to the king, and the acceptance of the Lex Regia. Thus, in Holberg’s account, secular popular legitimacy was conferred on the absolute monarchy, in return for which the Crown was duty-bound to safeguard the common good.

Holberg’s version, however, was not entirely what the government, as represented by the director of the Danish Department, Andreas Hojer, had had in mind. Therefore, in 1742, a Danish translation of *De Officiis*
A textbook in the new curriculum for the education of local civil servants.22 To mark the first centenary of the absolute monarchy in 1760, an official Danish version of the theory of monarchism and liberty was put forward in a speech by Erik Pontoppidan, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Copenhagen. A French version of the speech was printed with the title, *Discours sur la Liberté du Dannemarc depuis l’établissement du pouvoir illimité ... par un patriote*. Pontoppidan let it be known that the essential truth was that ‘the civil liberty of the Danish and Norwegian nation is as great, good and true a liberty as any other nation in Europe can boast at the present time.’23 This civil liberty consisted of equality before the law, the impartial administration of justice, government under the law, security, property, taxation levied at the same rate on all, and limited freedom of the press. The key words here were justice and security.

An important Danish figure in the development of this tradition was Jens Schielderup Sneedorff, a professor of jurisprudence at the Sorø Academy. In a book written in Danish and published in 1757, Sneedorff advanced his systematic theory of the state. This was the same year that André Roger published his *Lettres sur le Dannemarc*. Sneedorff’s book was entitled, *On Civil Government*, an obvious reference to John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*.24 But Sneedorff did not discuss Locke’s ideas about civil society. Instead, he combined the key concepts of the Holberg-Pufendorf tradition – security, justice, and the common good – with two from Montesquieu: honour and virtue. These ‘mentalities’ were each represented by monarchism and republicanism in *L’Esprit des lois*, but Sneedorff argued that virtue became corrupted too easily under a republican form of government, while virtue often achieved its finest manifestation under monarchism: ‘Virtue ... consists on the monarch’s side of love for the people, and on the part of the people of love for the monarch, but both must rest on love for the common good.’25

According to Sneedorff, monarchism was essentially absolute and he equated limited monarchism with an aristocratic form of republicanism. Virtue was manifested in the patriotism of the people, while the common good took shape in public opinion. The public debate should advise the government. If freedom of the press were real, the combination of patriotism and public opinion would join virtue to the common good under the justice and security conferred by stable monarchism.

The Holberg-Pufendorf tradition coupled with the Sneedorff-Montesquieu tradition laid the foundation for the political discourse which sustained the political culture of Danish monarchism in the last decades.
of the eighteenth century. But the discursive relationship between liberty and monarchism did not remain unchanged throughout the century. Until 1770 state and government were presented as the guarantee of liberty, as justice and security. After 1770 the relationship between liberty and monarchism increasingly became located in the public spirit and public opinion.

**The Revolution of 1772 and the Change of Discourse: Monarchism and Republicanism**

From 1770 the court physician, the reforming, Enlightened Johann Frederik Struensee, was the de facto ruler of Denmark-Norway, acting through Royal Cabinet orders, which all had to be signed by Struensee. During his brief regime, some two thousand Cabinet orders were issued. In July 1771 Struensee came out openly as the ruler, taking the title of Cabinet Minister, but as early as January 1772 he was felled by a counter-coup from within the court. Shortly afterwards he was tried and sentenced under the Royal Law (Lex Regia) – the constitutional basis of the country’s absolutism passed in 1665 – and beheaded. Thus, in terms of the history of political events, Struensee’s regime was a brief one. It had long-lasting effects, however, on attitudes to autocratic rule and on discussions of the problem of the state in general: For the Struensee controversy brought the political crisis of absolutism into the open. For even while lip-service was paid to the monarchy as a guarantee of rational legislation and social order, its actual body politic in the person of the king was behaving insanely and anarchically, and the exercise of absolute power was in the hands of a bourgeois politician. The king was made to appear incompetent and powerless as both a political and private individual. This double-dealing was not only embarrassing; it was also critical – in the pathological sense – for the political theory of absolutism.

Not just absolutism was compromised when the political physician seized power, so too was the Enlightened, rationally motivated bourgeois regime. Before the demand for bourgeois government in the name of the common good had even been raised, Struensee had, in fact, compromised the very idea.

Struensee was the uninhibited epitome of one of the fundamental problems of Enlightenment philosophy: the relationship between self-interest and the common good. Struensee represented personal ambition, fraud, and abuse of power approaching despotism. He also
legislated on key bourgeois issues – not least the central demand of the Enlightenment: unlimited liberty of the press, which was the very first decree given by Struensee, on 14 September 1770.

The Struensee interlude was the beginning of changes in the nature of public opinion and political theory. After 1772 the historical role, importance, and function of monarchism increasingly became issues of debate in Denmark.

The historian Peter Frederik Suhm (1728–1798) was at this time establishing himself as a quite central figure – a free intellectual – in Copenhagen public opinion. In 1771 he paid homage to Struensee’s law on the freedom of the press, and then shortly afterwards applauded Struensee’s fall, in an open letter ‘To the King’. Condemnation of Struensee as an individual was immediate and general – verging on exorcism. Yet much of the legislation from the Struensee period remained in force. What was to follow? The central figure in the coup was the historian and tutor of the princes at the court, Ove Hoegh Guldberg. As much a man of the middle classes as Struensee, Guldberg’s position of power was just as informal. What was to ensure that there would be no repetition?

In response to the political revolution of 1772, Suhm drew up a complete constitutional plan for the election of local representatives of the estates in sixteen electoral districts (six in Denmark, six in Norway, three in Schleswig-Holstein, and the last in Iceland). These representatives would form a forty-eight-man Parliament and would administer the state’s finances and taxes and fill public offices in conjunction with the king. Elections would be held every three years, and a majority of the electorate would consist of non-noble officials and clergymen from town and country. The members of the Parliament would have to possess either property or office.

Suhm presented his plan in person to Guldberg, the new central figure at court, on 17 January in 1772, the day after the revolution that overthrew Struensee. Suhm recorded in his diary that ‘I gave Guldberg my plan for changes in the system of government, but he is accustomed to slavery and rejected it.’ Suhm’s ideas did not remain buried, since he published some of them as part of his novel entitled Euphron (1774). At the end of the novel he wrote a charter: the forty-two ‘Rules of Government.’ These rules frame Suhm’s political thought about human rights and the political balance of the estates, as we learn from the first seven of them: ‘1. Honour religion ... 2. Honour learned men ... 3. Let everyone enjoy unlimited freedom of religion ... 4. Everyone should be
free to think, speak and write as he wants to do ... 5. Should some private man be offended by this liberty, let the laws be open for him ... 6. Keep the estates in balance ... 7. This liberty should be enjoyed by the peasant too.29

The crisis of absolutism must now have seemed chronic to Suhm. Thus, faced with the impossibility of practical constitutional reform during the political crisis, he drew up historical arguments for the rightness and necessity of political reform.

The basis of Suhm’s new version of the history of Denmark was a theory of an original freedom of the peasantry that had been quelled by the aristocracy and later neglected by the absolutist monarchy. The message was quite specific: Originally, the peasant had not been unappreciated and oppressed; the king had neither been constrained by the aristocracy nor autocratic, but had been elected as chieftain by popular assemblies which, according to Suhm, ‘could decide nothing without the consent of the commonalty.’ The innumerable peasants – the backbone of the nation – cultivated their plots, and the system was in a state of balance. Not until the advent of the abhorred feudal system had this happy balance been destroyed. ‘Instead of many thousand independent farmers one now had a few bishops, abbots and priors, and a few hundred lords, who had turned all the tillers of the fields into serfs,’ wrote Suhm in *Danmarks, Norges og Holstens Historie* [*The History of Denmark, Norway, and Holstein*], published in 1776.30 The balance of the nation had been disturbed, and it was now time to get it balanced. Suhm’s theory involved a political utopia, with the reinstatement in its rights of a future independent peasantry vis-à-vis the monarchy.

**Monarchism, Property, and Liberty – Tyge Rothe**

An estate-owner from the middle classes, Tyge Rothe (1731–1795) had an educational background that ranged from the academy at Sorø to Göttingen and other modern European universities. In 1759 he published a patriotic essay on *Love of Country* [or *Public Spirit*], written in the systematic but ahistorical style of Montesquieu.31 From the 1770s he was at work on his history of civilization. Between these two periods we find Rothe’s political career – serving the Struensee regime. The 1772 coup ended Rothe’s career in the central administration, and his declaration of loyalty to the king after Struensee’s fall does not seem to have been sufficiently convincing for the new men in power. Rothe retired to his estate and wrote an ambitious major work on *The Effect of Christianity on
the State of the European Peoples, in which he linked Christian ideals of the rights of man with the history of civil society. In the 1770s Rothe published the first four parts of his major historical work, including the Fall of Rome, in 1775. Thus, he had reached the treatment of the spread and effect of Christianity in the regions of Europe that had not been Roman provinces. His study of Tacitus’s Germany and Snorri’s account of Scandinavia fascinated him so much, however, that the implications of these works upset his whole publication plan. For Rothe came to the realization that the effects of Christianity were profoundly integrated with another, dominant historical process – the rise of feudalism, or the origins of what Montesquieu had aptly called ‘the feudal laws.’ Part 5 of his work on the effects of Christianity was not published until 1783, when it appeared under the title Europas Lensvæsen [Feudalism in Europe]. Part 5 constituted Rothe’s attempt, from a Scandinavian perspective, to revolutionize understanding of the history of the feudal system and the feudal aristocracy, for which scholars otherwise relied on Books XXX and XXXI of L’Esprit des lois.

Rothe’s point of departure was the fall of the Roman Empire and the conquest by the Franks of the Germanic area, where the feudal dispensation of the Romanized peoples had dissolved the communal Germanic ownership of the land. Rothe had found this described in Tacitus, according to whom the plot of land of the Germanic tribesman was ‘not his private property, freehold or allodium, but belonged to the community.’

Rothe also made use of Robertson’s, Russel’s, and Adair’s books, from the late 1770s, about the North American Indians, as well as Adam Ferguson’s history of civil society, for examples of the practical possibility of communal ownership of land and as arguments for the static nature of communal ownership.

But what of Scandinavia? Here the feudal system had not been the result of a conquest, which effected a transition from barbarism to the tyranny of a feudal aristocracy. The origins of the development of the feudal system in Scandinavia lay in the absence of the static communal ownership of land and the existence, instead, of private landed property – of the allodium – and of independent farmers. Here was a situation of which Montesquieu, Robertson, and Ferguson knew nothing, and of which they could know nothing, because they had not read the Scandinavian source material from the Middle Ages.

It was thus clear to Rothe that the Germani with their tribal commu-
nity had been barbarians, or the ‘Indians of Europe.’ In glorious Scandinavia, meanwhile, private property, the state, and civil society could be traced back beyond the mists of antiquity, and ‘whosoever would philosophise over the progress of civil society in Europe must know the North; if he does not, then he understands amiss the fairest and best of the history of our European humanity.’

The great discovery of allodialism that Rothe used in his book on European feudalism was an idea that he had developed in Nordens Statsforfatning [The Scandinavian Constitution] (volumes I and II, published in 1781 and 1782); this is one of the most remarkable works of the eighteenth century on the history of Denmark and Scandinavia. The aim of the Constitution was crystal-clear from the very first page. There Montesquieu was quoted concerning his discovery of les lois féodales, ‘une magnifique matière’; there, too, Justus Möser was pressed into service with a statement from the Osnabrückische Geschichte that history should be of direct political benefit to the literate peasantry.

Rothe’s central treatises on feudalism point out that ‘our oldest forefathers had no inherited nobility’ and ‘the Government of our forefathers was monarchy mixed with democracy.’ The main problem examined in the work was the difficulty of ‘comprehending the transition from one constitution to another, quite opposite,’ that is, how to explain the autonomous development of the feudal system that led to the decline of civil liberty. Rothe suggested that the reasons were to be sought in social history, that is, in the ownership of property and the ‘modification of customs.’ In the latter category of causal factors he included Christianity, which had modified what had originally been slavery to serfdom. This was in itself part of a civilizing process, he continued, but it did not function as such, because another factor had an even more radical effect – the centralization of land ownership. ‘Fundamentally, the principle was maintained that whosoever might be considered a landowner shared in governing with the King.’ The great landowners had kept political power tied to the land, not to the individual. Matters had become still worse when the feudal aristocracy broke down the power of the monarchy and crippled private property and, thereby, progress.

The image of the Norse golden age before the centralization of land ownership borrowed a great deal from the ideas of natural law as cultivated at the academy at Sorø. The concept of a Norse golden age is thus reminiscent of the theory of the origins of the state as taught by J.S. Sneedorf. True balance reigned in the monarchy before the private ownership of land brought on its corrupting political consequences.
The theory of the liberties under original northern monarchism – monarchy mixed with democracy – had an important precursor in Denmark, for in the centre of the Swiss republic of letters in Copenhagen we find the historian Paul-Henri Mallet. André Roger and Reverdil discussed the laws, manufactures, and conditions of agriculture in Denmark. Mallet, meanwhile, drew up a beautiful synthesis of Scandinavian history based on research in the old Norse tradition. Mallet’s *Introduction à l’Histoire de Dannemarc* was published in Copenhagen 1755, and it was followed in 1756 by his sourcebook, entitled *Monumens de la Mythologie et de la poésie des Celtes et particulièrement des anciens Scandinaves*. In the Anglo-Saxon world this work is mainly known through the translation by T. Percy, which bears the title, *Northern Antiquities: or, a Description of the manners, customs, religion and laws of the ancient Danes, and other Northern Nations*, published in London in 1770.

Mallet’s *Histoire de Dannemarc* was widely read in Europe because it was distributed from the office of Philibert in Geneva. As Mallet mentioned in his preface, it mostly was a compilation drawn from the works of Ole Worm, Stephanius, and Tormod Torfæus. Nevertheless, it was done with great skill and the result was powerful. In Mallet’s own words:

> Is it not well known that the most flourishing and celebrated states of Europe owe originally to the northern nations, whatever liberty they now enjoy, either in their constitution, or in the spirit of their government? For although the Gothic form of government has been almost every where altered or abolished, have we not retained, in most things, the opinions, the customs, the manners which that government had a tendency to produce? Is not this, in fact, the principal source of that courage, of that aversion to slavery, of that empire of honour which characterize in general the European nations; and of that moderation, of that easiness of access, and peculiar attention to the rights of humanity, which so happily distinguish our sovereigns from the inaccessible and superb tyrants of Asia?

The rights under the Gothic form of government were contrary to what was to be found in the declining Roman Empire: ‘If all Europe had received the yoke of Rome in this her state of debasement, this fine part of the world, reduced to the inglorious condition of the rest, could not have avoided falling into that kind of barbarity, which is of all others the most incurable; as by making as many slaves as there are men, it
degrades them so low as not to leave them even a thought or desire of bettering their condition.’

But what did Mallet actually mean by a Gothic form of government? In the chapter entitled, ‘Of the form of government which formerly prevailed in the North,’ we learn ‘that the Danes, who before the arrival of Odin were divided into many nations, and lived in great independence, were by force of arms subjected to kings more absolute, whom their conqueror placed over them. They were not long, however, before they recovered their right of electing their kings, and consequently all the other rights less essential to liberty.’ Originally monarchism was based on elective assemblies, though ‘the people seem always to have made it a law to choose the nearest relation of the deceased king,’ and ‘they still show the places where these elections were made.’ To question the laws of succession in the Lex Regia would have been very unhealthy in the eighteenth century. There could be no doubt, however, that the restoration of northern monarchism would have implied a change in government to some kind of limited monarchism, as so boldly proposed by historian Suhm in 1772.

The contributions by Mallet, Roger, and Reverdil opened new perspectives on the history of monarchism in Denmark-Norway. These Swiss men of letters defended the Danish monarchy on the European literary market – from a republican perspective. In the 1750s, the central problem and the most important task for Danish monarchism, were to release the absolute monarchy from the shadow of despotism. Defending monarchism meant defining monarchism in opposition to despotism. Defining monarchism meant discussing monarchism as good government, and good government was a matter of politics.

The Swiss circle in Copenhagen helped to create an image of the Danish monarchy as a publicly founded form of government: The political legitimacy of the monarchy was based in the action of the collective estates of the realm, whereby they handed power over to the king, and thus, in the destruction of an aristocratic form of government. The historical legitimacy of the monarchy was founded in the conception of an original northern monarchism, one between despotism and democracy.

**Why Monarchism in Denmark-Norway?**

Unlimited monarchism experienced a political crisis in the time after 1770, and the perception that there was in Denmark-Norway consensus regarding the necessity of an authoritarian state began to crumble. But
after 1784, a new government was able to enact a policy of reform that was carried through with the support of literate public opinion. To historians this period in the history of Denmark-Norway is known as ‘absolutism governed by public opinion.’ Thus, monarchism survived the period of high tension and intensity in the late eighteenth century, supported in particular by the general conditions of flourishing trade during the period of Danish neutrality. The French Revolution did not produce a republican political movement against monarchism in Denmark, even though attitudes towards the revolution were overwhelmingly positive during its first year in circles that shaped public opinion.

Loyalty towards monarchism in Denmark-Norway was rooted in the political discourse of ‘stable and just monarchism by popular consent,’ as we found described by Roger and Reverdil and argued in the Pufendorf-Holberg and Montesquieu-Sneedorf traditions. In the words of Sneedorf in 1760: ‘We are the only people who have given ourselves unlimited monarchs,’ but ‘our unlimited monarchs have made the whole people their advisers.’ To this political debate we must add the more radical historical discourse expressed by intellectuals such as Mallet, Suhm, and Rothe, who held that the original liberty of the North was rooted in the Gothic form of government, a form of government characterized as monarchism based on popular assemblies and the equilibrium of the estates.

Assemblies of estates did not meet until 1834. Monarchism had neither exhausted its reservoir of loyalty nor provoked an alternative. This created the political stage that led up to the revolution of 1848 and the summoning of a parliamentary assembly which drew up a new constitution: Limited monarchism replaced the Lex Regia. According to the Constitution of June 1849 every male citizen in Denmark more than thirty years of age could vote in parliamentary elections, unless he was a servant without his own household. The independent peasant, so cherished by Suhm and Rothe in the eighteenth century, finally had his vote.

Notes

1 Paul-Henri Mallet, Introduction à l’Histoire de Dannemarc (Copenhagen 1755), followed by Monumens de la Mythologie et des la Poesie des Celtes et particulièrement des Anciens Scandinaves pour servir de supplement et de preuves a l’Introduction a
L'Histoire de Dannemarc (Copenhagen 1756) and Histoire de Dannemarc I–III (Copenhagen 1758–77).


3 Ibid., 1–2.

4 Ibid., 11. In Roger’s original French: ‘d’où il est aisé de conclure que la révolution en otant à la Noblesse des exemptions odieuses, n’a fait que ramener à la Monarchie les principes d’une Aristocratie vicieuse, & opposer à sa puissance une digue d’autant plus nécessaire, que l’oppression est bien voisine de cette espece d’esclavage civil & politique, dans lequel elle tenoit les paysans.’ Lettres sur le Dannemarc, vol. 1, new ed. (Geneva, Claude Philibet 1767), 8–9.

5 André Roger died on a diplomatic mission in 1759. Lettres sur le Dannemarc was printed and sold by the Swiss publisher, Claude Philibert. He did business in Geneva as well as in Copenhagen, where he lived from 1755 to 1777. He was an important figure for the diffusion of the writings of the Swiss and French Enlightenment in Denmark. Philibert published Mallet and Reverdil’s journal Mercure Danois from the year 1757 in Geneva and Copenhagen. In 1770, the year that liberty of the press was proclaimed in Denmark-Norway, he published Reverdil’s second volume of Lettres sur le Dannemarc in a Danish translation in Copenhagen.

6 Reverdil described his experience as tutor to a prince in his memories: Struensee et la Cour de Copenhague, 1760–1772; Memoires de Reverdil, published by Alexandre Roger (Paris 1858).


8 Lettres sur le Dannemarc, vol. 2 (Geneva 1764), 106–14.


11 (London 1694).

12 Quoted from the Preface of the 1694 edition.


14 The 1694 ed., 232.


17 Ludvig Holberg, *Remarques sur quelques positions qui se trouvent dans L’Esprit des Lois* (Copenhagen 1753). It was Book XVII, ch. 3 that hurt: ‘Another of the northern Kingdoms has lost its laws; but we may trust to the climate that they are not lost in such a manner as never to be recovered.’ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* (New York 1975), 266.

18 ‘Pufendorf construes the political state as a human artifice imposed by men on themselves as an instrument of this-worldly security.’ Ian Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments* (Cambridge 2001), 181.

19 Ludvig Holberg, *Moralske Kierne, eller Introduction til Naturens og Folkerettens Kundskab* (*The Essence of Moral Law, or an Introduction to the Study of Natural and International Law, Compiled from the Writings of the most Pre-eminent Jurists, Principally Grotius, Puffendorf and Thomasius*) (Copenhagen 1716). The book was translated into German in 1748 and a Swedish edition appeared in 1789. Holberg studied in Holland (1704–5) and in England (1706–8), where, at Magdalene College, Oxford, he worked on his *Introduction to the Histories of the Principal European Kingdoms*, which appeared in Copenhagen in 1711. It followed Pufendorf’s *Einleitung zu der Historie der vornehmsten Reiche und Staaten* (1682–6).

20 Kåre Foss, *Ludvig Holbergs Naturrett på idéhistorisk Baggrund* (Oslo 1934), 455–76.

21 Ludvig Holberg, *Moralske Kierne* (Copenhagen 1969), 287. In the words of Pufendorf, in the second pact ‘the rulers bind themselves to the care of common security and safety, and the rest to render them obedience; and in which there is that subjection and union of wills, by reason of which a state is looked upon as a single person.’ Cited from Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments*, 186.
25 Jens Schielderup Sneedorff, *Om den borgerlige Regiering*, in ‘Samtlige Skrifter,’ vol. 7 (Copenhagen 1776), 361.
28 Suhm, *Hemmelige Efterretninger* (Copenhagen 1918), 72.
31 Tyge Rothe, *Tanker om Kierlighed til Fædrenelandet* (Copenhagen 1759).
33 Tyge Rothe, ‘Europas Lensvæsken,’ in *Christendommens Virkninger ... part V* (Copenhagen 1783), 102.
34 Ibid., 106ff.
36 Tyge Rothe, *Nordens Statsforfatning før Lehnstiden, og da Odelskab med Folkefrihed i Lehnstiden, og da Birkerettighed, Hoverie, Livegenskab med Aristokratie*, vol. I (Copenhagen 1781) 3. For further discussion see Helge Paludan, ‘Vor dan-

37 Rothe, ‘Europas Lehnsvæsen,’ 424.

38 Published in Geneva by Claude Philibert in 1763 together with Mallet’s Histoire de Dannemarc I–III.


40 Edward Gibbon read Mallet’s Introduction and parts of the history concerning the introduction of Christianity in the north during his stay in Florence in 1764. See J.G.A. Pocock, Barbarism and Religion, vol. 1 (Cambridge 1999), 280–1, 288. Gibbon commented on Mallet: ‘An important question occurs, why the inhabitants of the North should have so obstinately rejected Christianity, while their countrymen established in the empire embraced it with the utmost readiness.’ In the southern countries ‘every cause would concur to make him quit a mode of worship founded on ignorance and barbarism, and to substitute in its stead a religion connected with science which he began to relish, and inculcating the virtues of humanity which he began to value.’ Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon, ed. by John, Lord Sheffield, vol. 6 (Basel 1797), 277 and 279.

41 From the Preface of Paul Henri Mallet, Introduction à l’Histoire de Dannemarc ... (Copenhagen 1755). Cited from the translation by T. Percy, Northern Antiquities: or ... (London 1770 [1847]), 57–8.

42 Ibid., 58.

43 Ibid., 128 collated with the edition in Danish, Indledning udi Danmarks Riges Historie (Copenhagen 1756), 97.


46 J.S. Sneedorf’s Samlede Skrifter, vol. 7 (Copenhagen 1776), 461.


Since the 1990s many new empirical studies have stressed the continuous political role of the court in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe and the limitations it forced on the exercise of the monarch’s theoretically absolute power. The royal household, the advisory bodies, their way of conducting business and their personnel (especially the secretaries), privy councils, the roles of favourites, and various procedures and ceremonies are now receiving close attention. In so doing this more recent historiography emphasizes the crucial importance of the court in the making of the modern state.¹ This contemporary view differs markedly from the moral perspective of eighteenth-century philosophical authors who vested their hopes and fears in the king himself. They bemoaned the king’s virtual imprisonment within the court environment, leaving him no room to spearhead necessary reforms, while dreading the autocrat who abused power to push through changes without regard for his country’s traditions. Either way, the person of the monarch held centre stage because political thinking was in terms of the traditional numerical forms of government by one, the few, or the many. Government by one naturally tended to draw attention to the qualities of the autocrat himself and allowed moral philosophers to focus on character as the criterion of one-person rule.

In Henry Fielding’s novel *Tom Jones*, there is an interesting story that can be related to this theme. Having made Tom witness to a gypsy king’s admirable act of instant justice, Fielding proceeds to sing the praises of absolute monarchy. ‘No limited form of government is capable of rising to the same degree of perfection,’ he wrote and, speaking of second-century Rome, never was humankind so happy ‘as when the greatest part of the then known world was under the dominion of a single mas-
There was, however, one drawback. ‘In reality,’ Fielding continued, ‘I know but of one solid objection to absolute monarchy. The only defect in which excellent constitution seems to be, the difficulty of finding any man adequate to the office of an absolute monarch; for this indispensably requires three qualities very difficult, as it appears from history, to be found in princely natures.’ Fielding listed these qualities as: ‘first, a sufficient quantity of moderation in the prince, to be contented with all the power which is possible for him to have; secondly, enough of wisdom to know his own happiness; and thirdly, goodness sufficient to support the happiness of others, when not only compatible with, but instrumental to his own.’

These lines were cited by the Berlin bookseller Friedrich Nicolai in the introduction to his *Anecdotes about King Frederick II of Prussia*, published in 1788. Perhaps Frederick would have been amused to be compared to a gypsy king who assured Tom Jones that ‘it to be ver troublesome ting to be king and always to do justice.’ In any case, Nicolai praised Fielding as a good judge of human character, called him a zealous republican – in the sense of a patriot – and hailed his own fatherland for having seen Fielding’s three requisites of a good absolute monarch (sufficient moderation, wisdom, and goodness) united in their late king. For Fielding good absolutist rule was too rare to take any chances, but Nicolai could only hope that the exception had become the rule. These three unique qualities, even if modified in various ways, he assured his readers, were united again in Frederick II’s successor, Frederick William II. From Nicolai’s correspondence at the time it appears, however, that he not only doubted they were but actually anticipated a more repressive rule by the new king. Similarly doubtful about the incidence of the preferred personal prerequisites of a monarch, Johann Georg Schlosser, in Baden, attributed the calling of the French Estates-General in late 1788 to a sudden change of heart by Louis XVI and unique in the annals of despotism. This raises the question about the subjects to one-man rule such as Nicolai, Schlosser, and others like them: how committed were they to absolute monarchy?

Nicolai and Schlosser were representative of German so-called popular philosophy, one of a wider variety of Enlightenment philosophical traditions than are usually recognized. Popular philosophy was a ‘science of man,’ that is, in my definition, a combination of practical philosophy and literary skills with the goal of morally educating a literate but non-specialized public to be useful citizens of the absolute state. In this sense the popular philosophers were the true inheritors of Christian
Thomasius, who is often described in German historiography as a popular philosopher of the first generation. Like the popular philosophers later on, Thomasius wanted to speak with propriety on all the themes of human existence rather than to pursue philosophical questions not directly relevant to human life. In the wake of the religious wars of the seventeenth century, and on the heels of Pufendorf’s natural law theory, Thomasius developed a philosophy that was rooted in statist political jurisprudence. The state’s rights and powers, he argued, were to be used not for the moral improvement of the subjects of the realm, but only to preserve their security, and this was the only legitimate end of the state. Accordingly, Thomasius wrote in 1695:

Is it not shown in Germany and all the kingdoms of Europe what kind of disaster and injury comes from religious conflict and rebellion? Were the power to suppress such disturbances as arise from religion to be removed from the prince, the whole republic would certainly be ruined. Therefore, to my way of thinking, they reason correctly and prudently who say: That in so far as it stands in their free will, all conduct of subjects – both natural and moral – is subject to the power of the prince ... Because damage to the republic can arise from all such conduct of subjects.\(^5\)

Authoritarianism for the sake of survival was quite successful, so successful in fact that by the mid-eighteenth century arguments in its favour had lost much of their appeal. Thomasius’s dire warnings receded from consideration as civil war became a thing of the past. The internal peace of states was no longer continuously threatened by subjects passionately intent on having their own religious convictions dominate over those of others. By this time, rather, peace was threatened once more by the passions of rulers who, in the words of Frederick II, believed that ‘the principle of expansion was the basic law of government from the smallest to the largest state, a passion so deeply rooted in their foreign ministries as the striving for universal despotism in the Vatican.’\(^6\) The Silesian popular philosopher Christian Garve concurred and supposed that every sovereign prince – Frederick II himself not excluded – suspected the policies of his equals to be guided by greed, ambition, and the unjust desire for conquest.\(^7\)

Under these changed circumstances, the second-generation popular philosophers of the latter part of the eighteenth century were less concerned with the monarch’s authority to secure domestic peace, even while they did not deny this was a primary task, than with finding legiti-
mate room for the full realization of the people’s moral possibilities, for
the fashioning of man and citizen. Like Thomasius, they understood
moral action to be the outcome of the complexities of social reality and
the insights into human nature gleaned from practical and historical
experience. However, they expanded on Thomasius’s idea of the social.
In his Philosophy of the Court (Hof-Philosohie), published in 1688, Thom-
asius had conceptualized the philosophical-juridical university training of
new servants for the absolute state. The popular philosophers addressed
their writings to the educated classes in general, to the larger literate
but non-specialized public, as material to support them in their striving
for a virtuous life under the conditions of the absolute state.

With this program they fell in line with the public’s increasing aver-
sion to the prince’s court, seen as the locus of moral depravity, an aver-
sion usually accompanied by anti-French sentiments. As much as the
pedantic scholar was made the moral-intellectual target of the popular
philosophers, so too did the haughty courtier become their moral-polit-
ical target. For them, court life in general prevented the prince from
fully devoting himself to the well-being and happiness of his state and its
people. Insofar as the prince was able to distance himself from the ‘pri-
ivate’ world of court life and dedicate himself to the moral pursuit of the
common weal, the popular philosophers called him enlightened. It is
important to note that this epithet was meant as an incentive and, con-
sidering the general lack of enthusiasm on the princes’ side to comply
with this demand, not a factual observation. In line with the long-stand-
ing appeal to the king as father of his country, who could not possibly
exploit or neglect the country’s ‘children,’ was the rhetorical effort to
commit the king to govern according to the principles this phrase sug-
gested.8 The appeal to enlightenment was designed to persuade the
absolute prince into becoming the exception to the kind of rulers Field-
ing found most characteristic of royal absolutism.

Notwithstanding their criticism of court life, the popular philoso-
phers did not live in isolation from the court. The limited size of most
German states and their small populations made frequent close contact
between ruler and ruled on a regular basis all but inevitable. Careers
often were advanced through personal acquaintance with the rulers
themselves, as in the case of Thomas Abbt with the Count of Lippe-
Schaumburg and Schlosser with the Margrave of Baden. Personal rela-
tionships also abounded in much larger Prussia with its approximately
six million inhabitants. In Berlin, Johann Georg Sulzer and Nicolai were
personal friends with some of the king’s favourites, notably the marquis
d’Argens. Sulzer, and Johann Jacob Engel a generation later, were both instructors to princes of the royal house. Engel produced a manual for them in the continuing tradition of the humanist mirror of princes genre, but now requiring the king to live up to modern, bourgeois virtues. Sulzer, Nicolai, Garve, and Moses Mendelssohn—all were admitted before the royal presence, although this privilege did not prevent Frederick II from blocking Mendelssohn’s proposed membership in the Prussian Academy or from being dismissive of Garve for his inability to speak proper French.

Direct involvement in the affairs of the various ruling houses, however, did not cause the popular philosophers to undertake a principled defence of monarchism unless it was to challenge the republican counter-model directly, as did Johann August Eberhard, or until the French Revolution forced even the strongest critics of monarchism to take its side, as happened with Schlosser. Basically ambivalent about royal absolutism, then, the popular philosophers—being practical, public-spirited men who preferred the lessons of experience to the constraints of theory—tended to be critical rather than supportive of one-man rule, as long as it was not endangered.

Unlike what the proponents of the newer theory of natural law were doing, the popular philosophers did not phrase their criticism of royal absolutism in terms mainly of the civil and human rights that citizens supposedly had retained from the state of nature in face of the monarch’s power. The popular philosophers generally did come to recognize these rights. But their emphasis was on the disappearance of citizens’ devotion to the nation as a whole, on their patriotism, under conditions of absolute monarchy. They focused on the citizen as a freely acting moral individual and, in doing so, applied republican values to the monarchical state. Thus, in his 1761 work On Death for the Fatherland (Vom Tod fürs Vaterland), Thomas Abbt maintained, against the backdrop of the Seven Years War, that citizens of a monarchy no less than those of a republic could act patriotically, even to the point of sacrificing their lives for the common good. The appeal to the person of the king (as opposed to his legal position) to commit himself to the values of the Enlightenment was an effort to integrate the monarch and society. Meanwhile, the phrase ‘citizens as patriots’ was used in identifying citizens with the state the king ruled. To demonstrate this point I will present the views of Sulzer, Nicolai, and Garve, three Prussian popular philosophers, who all happened to live under the exceptional rule of Frederick II.
Born in 1720 in Winterthur, a city subject to the Zurich republic, Sulzer was the foremost popular philosopher of his generation. He spent his professional life in Berlin where he taught mathematics at the Joachimsthal Gymnasium. He became an influential member of the philosophical class of Frederick II’s reorganized Academy and was eulogized as ‘Sulzer the Wise,’ a much respected contributor to the Berlin Enlightenment.

Sulzer argued for the notion of patriotic citizens under royal absolutism by insisting on the importance of the fine arts in shaping them. Others before him had stressed the civilizing function of the arts. David Hume postulated that the arts and sciences originated under the conditions created by free government; but while the sciences continued to grow in a republic, the polite arts, especially the art of conversation, flourished only in what Hume called a civilized monarchy. Hume sharply distinguished this type of one-man rule, sometimes inappropriately branded tyranny, from ‘barbarous monarchy’ in which there was no place for either the sciences or the arts, as well as from contemporary European republics such as Switzerland and Holland that were characterized to his mind by their lack of politeness. Even though he was the editor of the influential German translation of Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Sulzer may or may not have been familiar with the essay on the arts and sciences. Nevertheless, whereas Hume perceived the arts as thriving in civilized monarchies, Sulzer detected in this situation the failure of literature and the arts to live up to their republican potential.

Sulzer found that the fine arts civilized savage man even among relatively isolated peoples in the murkiness of the deep past and not just in Europe. Once society was established, he maintained, people from nations that cultivated the arts were morally more perfect than those without the privilege of being exposed to their benevolent influence. This contention is illustrated by the frontispiece of Sulzer’s lexicon entitled *General Theory of the Fine Arts (Allgemeine Theorie der Schönen Künste)*, which was published in two volumes, one in 1771 the other in 1774. The background pictures scenery from the savage life; in the foreground sits Minerva while behind her Beauty is illuminated by the beaming sun and surrounded by the Graces with the Muses’ attributes. The civilizing function of the arts was very important to Sulzer, but it by no means exhausted their potential. A main protagonist in the esthetic revolution of the mid-eighteenth century, Sulzer embedded the arts in a larger system of moral philosophy in which politics, philosophy, and the fine arts...
(dramatic art being the most important) were three poles around which turned the human drive for happiness. The arts owed their inclusion in this ensemble to their inherent ability to incite people to act on the imperatives of politics and philosophy by giving body, as it were, to the truths which they propounded. This was the advantage esthetics, as the science of sensuous knowledge, offered over rational knowledge: ‘If truth be active, it should in the form of the good not be recognized [by reason] but felt [by the heart], because only the latter arouses the appetitive power.’ A state’s ruler, therefore, would do well to stimulate the arts in every possible way in order to generate law-abiding and well-informed citizens. Showing good taste in everything, from public festivals, monuments, and buildings down to the coins in circulation and the metal tools used in housing construction, should remind all citizens of the wisdom of the laws which they were obeying and the soundness of the concepts that they used. As important for the country as the lawgiver and the philosopher, the good artist kept the citizens aware of the fragility of their civilized, political existence. Conversely, the citizens had a high stake in the preservation of the state which guaranteed them their continuing security: this meant that they must be patriotic citizens. Much of Sulzer’s sense of urgency for this idea derived from his experience of the Seven Years War when the fate of Prussia, his adopted country, hung by a thread. In the main, though, he extended ideas first propounded in the 1720s by his teachers Johann Jakob Bodmer and Johann Jacob Breitinger in his native Zurich.

It was not oligarchic Zurich, however, but the republics of ancient Greece where for Sulzer the arts for the first, and last, time had been practised in the manner in which they ought to be. ‘The Greeks had the right idea about the fine arts being able to fashion morals and to support philosophy and even religion ... great poets [were] considered important people able to give force to their laws.’ Here Sulzer was following Johann Joachim Winckelmann, an author he much admired and, in vain, had tried to engage for his lexicon. In his *Thoughts on the Emulation of Greek Painting and Sculpture*, published in 1755, and then in his *History of Art in Antiquity*, which appeared in 1764, Winckelmann had attributed the flourishing of the arts in ancient Greece to its climate as well as to its political liberty. Indeed, the reason that Winckelmann declined to go to Berlin, where Sulzer tried to have him appointed as librarian of Frederick II’s Academy, was his loathing of German princely courts which he perceived to be the chief obstacles to the revival of the
classical arts. Like Winckelmann, in the German replay of the struggle between the moderns and the ancients, Sulzer decidedly was a partisan of the latter; but in contrast to Winckelmann, he also was more hopeful about the possibility of restoring the arts and literature to their former glories. To present this option to his fellow citizens had been his rationale for writing the *Lexicon*.

In the *Lexicon* entry on the ‘Ancients’ (*Die Alten*), Sulzer went to some length to defend the quality as well as the morality of ancient literature against its depreciation in theories of progress which favoured modern concepts. The result of this effort was a historical sensitivity that reinforced an esthetic appreciation of ancient literature. One example that Sulzer gave, the soldier’s contemptuous gesture in the fourth scene of the first act of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, might seem grotesque to modern taste, but actually, he suggested, it was excellent, if one was aware of the classical poet’s need at every point to make his fellow citizens abhor monarchy. Reading the ancient Greeks in the light of their customs and laws, Sulzer concluded, would make abundantly clear why the impact of their literary works made for far more capable statesmen, better citizens, and braver soldiers than did the literature of modern times.19 This intimate connection between the arts and politics did not last, however. Sulzer explained that the Greek golden age came to an end as luxury and the pursuit of private interests slowly began to replace the republican sensibility for the common weal. With that, the fine arts were absolved from their service to the state and cultivated merely as pastime entertainment. A performance of a Sophocles tragedy came to cost the state more than the Persian Wars themselves had. ‘What initially was destined to fill the mind with patriotic fervor now served to encourage idleness and to suppress all thought of the common weal.’20 In these circumstances the Romans had no difficulty putting an end to Greek political liberty, while continuing to view the arts in the unfavourable light in which they had first encountered them in decadent Greece.

Sulzer did not think that the political conditions of his own time were well suited to once again raising the fine arts to the standards set by Greece’s golden age. The arts of his day seemed to him mere shadows of what they could be, mostly cultivated at the numerous princely courts to which the people had no access, and whose patrons and artists both were clueless about their true goal. ‘Thoughtfully observe our buildings and houses, our gardens, everything around us to which the fine arts contribute, and say whether the daily use of all these things is capable of elevat-
ing the taste and the sensual and mental dispositions in any one person!' Sulzer’s diagnosis was clear. If the arts were to be a tool of patriotism, and if the production and enjoyment of the arts had to take on the serious business of fashioning man and citizen, they had to be rescued not only from lower-class popular culture but also from aristocratic displays of wealth and the idleness of court life in general. Accordingly, many entries in the *Lexicon* contain criticism of courts where the arts were not given the patriotic dignity Sulzer had assigned them.

A good example is the entry on ‘Character.’ Here Sulzer first underlined the importance of depicting character in the fine arts. ‘Among the diverse objects the fine arts present to us,’ he wrote, ‘the character of thinking beings is no doubt the most important; consequently, the expression or image of the moral character is the most important task of art and the most excellent contribution of poets in particular.’ Then he added a psychological element to the moral element. The character portrayed in art and literature must, so to speak, be true to character, that is, the portrayed character must be a believable personage modified by his temperament, the customs of the group to which he belongs, and the peculiarities of the time in which he lives. Everything fantastic and arbitrary, by contrast, must be excluded. In other words, the artist should present characters as morally and intellectually fully developed individuals. ‘Although we do not know the person whose portrait we are viewing, we discover in it a character, a life, a soul, a temperament, which we have observed in living people and therefore a similarity with a real person.’ Finally, Sulzer put all this in a political context. In ancient Greece’s golden age of the arts, he believed, people enjoyed greater freedom and therefore acted more spontaneously than was possible under the conditions of eighteenth-century absolutism. Every Greek citizen took the liberty to show who he really was, and he did not take other people for models, whereas currently, Sulzer argued, people were held by many bonds that were preventing a complete and free development of their mental energies; people felt the pressures of fashion emanating from court life and imagined that they had to act, speak, and pretend to be like certain other people who set the tone everybody else was to follow. ‘With a human being limited in so many ways it’s very hard to get to know natural man and to see how far his powers can reach.’ In literally depicting the members of the court and the society that it produced, the art of portrait painting revealed their debased politics. Court life, in this view, induced mere thoughtless parroting in society at large, not self-thinking patriots devoted to the common weal.
It should be noted that this critique of the arts dominated by the court and unable to reveal natural man is not be confused with an endorsement of Rousseau’s cultural primitivism. Sulzer’s position was far more ambiguous. He was a partisan on the side of the ancients, yet he firmly believed that the full political potential of the fine arts could be realized in the same monarchies at whose courts they currently were being so terribly abused: revival of the fine arts was a political desideratum. To simply condone one-man rule was not enough for them to prosper in civilized monarchies, as Hume had stated. Sulzer argued that the moral legitimacy of such rule was determined by the reciprocal relationship between ruler and artist, for the wise prince allowed the quality of the fine arts to raise the patriotic sense of the citizens. The true theory of the fine arts, therefore, consisted in solving what Sulzer referred to as a psychological and political problem. ‘How does one go about employing the inherent human tendency to the sensual, and in particular cases using it as a means to irresistibly call man to do his [patriotic] duties?’ In solving this problem, Sulzer asserted, both artist and ruler would find the means to make the available arts more perfect and better applicable. His *Lexicon* could not be clearer in suggesting the task ahead. But nothing in his published works and letters indicates that Sulzer thought that this task was properly understood, let alone being dealt with in the monarchies of his time, not even in the country ‘in which I live and enjoy living.’ However exceptional its ruler, a new golden age was not about to dawn in Prussia.

In a very different way the view that absolutist rule corrupted man’s capacity to develop himself morally and intellectually is also evident in Friedrich Nicolai’s correspondence with Isaak Iselin. Their interest was not the arts, but economics and politics. For three years, from 1770 until 1773, the two friends intensively discussed the merits of French physiocracy against the background of the severe famine that at the time plagued parts of Europe.

This private correspondence had a public side as well. Nicolai was the publisher of the widely distributed *German Book Review (Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek)*, the torch of the German Enlightenment, to which over a period of thirteen years Iselin contributed almost sixty reviews. Several were on the topic of physiocracy. Curiously, their positions in the debate were the reverse of the ones one would expect. Iselin was an official in the city republic of Basel and a convert to the new economic school and its accompanying theory of absolutism. He later modelled
his own journal, *Ephemerides of Humanity* (*Ephemeriden der Menschheit*), on the physiocratic journal *Ephemerides of the Citizen* (*Ephemerides du citoyen*). Iselin continuously hammered on the correctness of physiocratic theory and on the injustices inflicted by government interference in the economy. Nicolai, a subject of the Prussian king, by contrast, never was convinced by the new doctrine and advocated limited monarchy. Consequently, their discussion led nowhere, with Nicolai several times proposing to end it even if the fruitless debate did not end their friendship.

In the beginning of their discussion Nicolai pointed to the wholesome effects of Prussian economic policy. For example, he said, corn magazines, built and maintained since the reign of Frederick William I, were checking shortfalls during the current famine. Iselin disagreed and, instead of the expensive and inefficient corn magazines, recommended the application of physiocratic theory. Freeing the grain trade would be profitable when harvests were plentiful, and in bad times would prevent shortages and high prices everywhere. Nicolai was not convinced. While reading up on physiocratic literature, he insisted on the particularity of each individual state. What was good for the port city of Hamburg, which was occupied exclusively with commerce, was not necessarily good for Prussia, whose economy was based on agriculture and industry, as well as some commerce. The question was not, therefore, as Iselin had suggested, whether governments had failed to apply physiocratic theory to explain the apparent failure almost everywhere to find solutions for the famine. Rather, theory and praxis were altogether different things.28

Nicolai’s tack changed after reading Iselin’s then newly published *Essay on Sociability* (*Versuch über die gesellige Ordnung*). In this short book Iselin introduced the German-speaking public to French economic thought and to the political doctrines of physiocracy, which he presented in the form of divine right theory. As he put it, the ruler’s authority did not derive from some chimerical contract, but from the divine will. Supreme authority in the state should be undivided, and citizens’ demands for political rights, although understandable, were therefore misplaced. The only permissible counterbalance to supreme authority was the citizens’ wisdom and virtue.29 Already latently present in their previous letters, the discussion between the two friends was now focusing on the issue of forms of government. In the idealized terms of German anglophilia at this time, Nicolai in his response highly recommended limited monarchy as it functioned in Britain. There, he wrote, citizens
counterbalanced the government out of fear that an all-powerful king would not easily be inclined to limit his own power, since he was used to command and never to obey. Nicolai, friend of Thomas Abbt and publisher of Abbt’s work, then proceeded to launch his attack on absolute monarchy. When citizens cannot participate in political power, he asserted, they will not develop the appropriate mental abilities. ‘The more energetic the king, the more the public spirit of the citizens, their love for the whole of the country, and their patriotism (Patriotismus), disappears and becomes nothing but nationalism (Nationalstolz) or at best love of a good king. They will forget their rights, get accustomed to obey, and unaccustomed to contradict.’ Loss of individual moral autonomy was the important point for Nicolai, as for Abbt and Sulzer: Under royal absolutism the citizen ‘loses his self-confidence and forgets that he is an independent person.’

In Nicolai’s eyes, Iselin had made his case worse by his review of the 1771 German translation of John Brown’s *Thoughts on Civil Liberty, on Licentiousness and Faction* (originally published in 1765). In this review Iselin criticized the British constitution, and for that reason Nicolai apparently did not want to publish it in his journal. And when Iselin in his review of Albrecht von Haller’s political novel *Alfred* doubted that political liberty had made Britain a happier country, Nicolai in collaboration with Eberhard amended it with a paragraph showing the importance of open political discussion and participation.

In a subsequent letter to Iselin, Nicolai further sharpened his criticism. Every Prussian citizen can put his case immediately to the king over the protestations of lower officials. ‘But do you really believe,’ he rhetorically asked Iselin, ‘that something will not happen if the king wants it to happen?’ It is one of the great misfortunes for humankind, he continued, ‘that in [absolute] monarchies all political virtues are useless except that of obedience, and all members of the state who are not the king’s servants never have to do anything of their own volition for the state, but must always be passive.’ Like Abbt, Nicolai called for the citizen’s political engagement with the state he was part of. Referring to Edmund Burke’s *Thoughts on the Causes of the Present Discontents*, published in 1770, he lauded the American revolutionaries who had not forgotten the tradition of striving for political liberty.

Nicolai mentioned citizens’ and human rights, but he did not speculate about their origins. Much more important to him was their continuous practice. The rights of man and citizen did not make political action possible, quite the reverse: political activity produced the citizen and the
human being, without which they were doomed to passivity, he contended, or perhaps better: rights and action were mutually dependent. For action, that is, the exercise of rights, said Nicolai, required the right to a free press, which did not exist under the conditions of the absolute state. Freedom of the press was what political liberty in Prussia boiled down to for Nicolai. Opponents of political liberty were wont to say that if a monarchy is ruled badly, a republic is better; if a republic is ruled badly, a monarchy is better. But for Nicolai this saying came down to a defence of autocracy, because without risking imprisonment, ‘whether the fortress is called Bastille, Spandau, or Munkholm, in absolute monarchies no one was allowed to say that in fact they were badly ruled.’ Indeed, ten years later (in 1784), when almost at the end of his long reign, Frederick II again prohibited all public criticism of court and government.

As a bookseller and publisher Nicolai had more than his own material interest in mind when he regularly and publicly protested against censorship, most famously when at the end of 1777 his journal fell victim to the Austrian censor. In the debate on freedom of the press in the secret Wednesday Society in 1783, the two popular philosophers Nicolai and Mendelssohn, together with the Prussian official Christian Wilhelm Dohm, were the only members who voted for greater freedom, against the majority of Prussian bureaucrats. Several years after Frederick William II ascended to the throne in 1786, Nicolai’s journal was forbidden in his own Prussia as well. ‘Nowhere in Germany,’ he concluded in 1794, ‘do we have true, that is, unrestricted freedom to write on topics referring to government abuses in such a way as a Voltaire wrote and a Wilberforce speaks ... and it is easily considered an insult if one directly attacks prejudices connected to the interests of the powerful.’ By his own experience Nicolai learned, as he had feared all along, that Fielding’s objection to autocracy was correct: There were few if any exceptions to the rule.

Nicolai’s harsh assessment of freedom of the press in Prussia was not shared by Christian Garve. Born in 1742, the year in which his native Silesia was annexed by the Prussian king, Garve actually managed to paint a rather rosy picture of its practice. He did so in a work on Frederick II in which he described, in Sulzer’s sense, the character not so much of the king, but of a rather extraordinary human being who also happened to have ruled the Prussians for almost half a century. Regarding criticism of his person and his government, Frederick II had allowed
‘republican freedom,’ Garve noticed. ‘Secure in the love of his subjects, the submissiveness of those he had conquered, and the phlegmatism of both,’ as he put it, Frederick purportedly had been in a position, more so than any other absolute ruler, to allow freedom of thought and the press even in political matters. Garve conceded that its suppression might protect the ruler in times of upheaval, much like the control of a free grain trade might be of immediate relief to the population in times of famine. But, unlike Nicolai, he did not see freedom of the press as limiting the ruler’s absolute power, even if in his opinion in the long run both ruler and people undoubtedly would be better off if both the press and the grain trade were left free.

Yet for Garve absolute power was no less a deplorable form of government than it was for Sulzer and Nicolai. Like them Garve, too, blamed despotism for destroying patriotism among the citizens (Bürger), whose failure to contribute to the state’s well-being he attributed to their complete exclusion from its administration. Despotism, he observed, made a country’s happiness dependent on the good character, skills, and mood of the ruler, traits which, again, seldom met in one person. But instead of confronting absolutism head on with proposals to mitigate it, as Sulzer and Nicolai did, Garve was more interested in the limitations set by the system’s inner workings, that is, by how and to what extent the absolute ruler was restrained or able to create flexibility for himself in his interactions with the court environment, the population at large, and his peers abroad. In other words, Garve embedded Henry Fielding’s set of the moral qualities of a good absolute prince in a wider context of institutional and cultural behaviours, which went well beyond the usual singling out of the court as the origin of depravity and tyranny.

Garve explained Frederick II’s ability to push through important reforms as the result of his making himself independent of both the court and the bureaucracy. He considered this the most distinguishing characteristic of the king’s regime, and called the system that Frederick had set up cabinet government (Regierung aus dem Cabinet). By this Garve meant that, with very few exceptions, this king dealt with his ministers neither in assembly nor in person. Instead he used secretaries who, themselves, without prestige, acted as intermediaries between the monarch and the ministers, excerpting and delivering reports in one direction and orders in the other. Garve observed here Frederick II’s increasing hesitation to rely too much on a bureaucracy whose power rested on procedures and competed with his own capacity to rule.

Thus, for Garve, the position of the successful, that is, reformist,
autocrat rested on his prevailing in the continuous power conflicts in which he was involved. As his cue, Garve took an observation made by the Comte d’Argenson about pre-revolutionary France, where absolutism had been limited not by laws but by customs, the privileges of the various estates, and ceremonies. These established rights and religious and political opinions were for Garve no more than arbitrary products of historical circumstances which, over time, had acquired the tacit approval of king and subjects alike. By having fashioned the constitution, the ways in which government was exercised, and even the character of the population, these rights and opinions had all but assumed the legitimacy of the original rights (Natur der Constitutions-Rechte) by which the state had come into being. Rather than seeing these limitations as preventing abuse of power, Garve perceived them to be obstacles to the monarch’s efforts at reform. Inevitably, there would be circumstances in which the need for reform and the affection for ancient custom would clash. Abstracting from the French example and assuming that revolution was not an option, Garve postulated, that it then depended on the occasion and on the ruler’s personal skills whether he would forbear with these ‘prejudices,’ in particular if the nation considered them to be bulwarks against arbitrary power, or whether he would slowly carry through with his reform work. To be sure, in Prussia, pressing ancient rights would have been an exercise in futility, as there were no traditional forces able to contest the king’s power – there was no ancient constitution to which Prussians could harken back, as Garve observed elsewhere. But although an absolute king should not give up on his reforms altogether in countries where these rights could be insisted on, in others where this was not the case, the king, nevertheless, should not become a despot who under the pretext of pursuing the common weal forced his reforms on his subjects and in the process trampled on their rights, customs, and established opinions. Especially in regard to religious habits it made no sense to Garve to attempt to change them before most believers were ready for that, even when their traditions offended the more enlightened parts of the nation. Obviously this remark was made with Joseph II’s hasty and ill-fated reforms still fresh in mind. But Garve did not notice the circular argument, a logical (although not historical) error in all reformist thinking: when the people involved finally were ready for reform, they in fact had already achieved it and no official reform was needed anymore.
How, then, did the reformist ruler cut through the thicket of traditions, forms, and opinions? Garve saw two ways open to him. The first, opportunistic method was for the king to feign respect for tradition while in the meantime pushing through his own plans or, in Garve’s words, ‘to connect authority with forms.’ He did not approve of this dissembling technique (which in fact came straight from Machiavelli’s *Discorsi*, Book I, chapter 25, although Garve attributed it here to d’Argenson). Performed to perfection in France, in the end it had led to the awful revolution. That was only to have been expected. As many historical examples proved to Garve, deceiving the people by seeming to adhere to traditional forms while essentially changing the constitution would always result in the transition from republican liberty to despotic one-man rule. Although slow, difficult, and often impossible, the second and in his eyes best method would be for the king to shape public opinion, convincing people until they recognized the proposed reforms as the better alternative to their traditional way of doing things and then freely cooperating in the execution of the reforms. This method, of course, described the ideal absolute ruler whom to a large degree Garve saw incarnated in Frederick II. By implication, cautious reform as implemented by Frederick made his regime no less autocratic, but neither did it make it deteriorate into despotism. The late Prussian king, Garve elaborated, had been rather respectful of established rights and had generally agreed with public opinion in all matters except religion. In this regard, Europe’s first non-christian prince had showed no wish to force his own opinions on the nation, and while his religiously orthodox subjects were not enamoured of his free-thinking, they obeyed him nonetheless. Garve focused on the question of how Frederick had coped with ceremonies and procedures, by which he understood both the solemn acts involving church and state, and the control of conflict among states or among citizens.

Garve pointed to the necessity of ceremonies where people fight over something, especially property, for these would have the purpose of making it impossible to violate contracts, ensure possession of property, and prevent war. ‘Everywhere where people meet who disagree and don’t trust each other, their behaviour becomes more formal, more ceremonial in their manners, stiffer even in their courteous expressions.’ Ceremonies and procedures in the form of laws in civil society and of treaties between princes who still exist in the state of nature were the signs by which people manage to live together more or less peacefully,
that is, ceremonies were to be displayed in particular in courts of justice and at international congresses, such as the Westphalian peace negotiations or the sessions of the Imperial Diet in Regensburg.  

Ceremonies and procedures also constituted, said Garve, a historical-cultural phenomenon. Their heyday for Germany was in the seventeenth century, while their observance had markedly declined with the advance of the Enlightenment. Garve considered this decline to be a clear indication of political-moral progress because formalities did not just slow down the government business at hand but, more importantly, hindered a person’s ability to think for himself. Garve attributed this progress to administrative reform – the establishment of Revenue Offices (Finanz-Collegien) with trained officials under Frederick William I – and to the introduction of standing armies first under Louis XIV and soon after also in Prussia: in short, to the combination of ‘arms and revenues’ (Armee und Kasse). Procedures in Garve’s sense were by their very nature less dominant in the former and all but absent in the latter institution. After Frederick II ascended the throne in 1740 he, therefore, could only be confronted with ceremonies and procedures at three other occasions: at the court in Berlin, in his country’s courts of justice, and in his diplomatic relationships with foreign powers.  

Garve elaborated on the king’s struggles on all three fronts. First, Frederick had escaped the pitfalls of the Berlin court simply by physically removing himself from it. Unlike Louis XIV, who merely relocated his entire court to Versailles, Garve suggested that Frederick II found in Potsdam and Sans Souci the peace and quiet to rule his lands independently of the court, his relatives, and even his ministers, during the day, while spending his evenings with a select circle of his philosopher-friends. (The latter, as Nicolai pointed out, were never allowed to discuss politics, which Frederick considered to be his prerogative.) Frederick further liberated himself from court ceremonies by what Garve called the efficiency of military spirit and tone, including dressing in military attire, thus restraining the costly show of fashion. Connecting easily with wit and philosophy, the king’s free spirit had allowed him to breach court ceremonies with impunity. In Garve’s view, in austere Potsdam good taste won out over the observation of proprieties. But one can also recognize in Garve’s depiction a reference to ancient Roman military virtue, as described by Montesquieu.

Second, since Garve associated ceremonies with control of conflict, he recognized that diplomats and diplomacy could not easily do without them. As, in the European courts, conflict was rooted in reciprocal sus-
picion, in order to be relieved of the burden of ceremonies, the absolute ruler must try to lessen the degree of distrust between himself and his peers. In addition he should conduct foreign relations in person, all the more so since German princes had stopped meeting in person at the Imperial Diet, and keep his ambitious and plotting diplomats on a tight rein by giving them exact instructions. Again, because of his personal qualities, explained Garve, Frederick II had been quite successful in both methods, particularly after the end of the Seven Years War.51

Third, and most difficult, were the ceremonies of the courts of justice, which in Garve’s eyes the king must resist for the good of the country. If the courts were merely to apply the law – here Garve apparently was responding to Montesquieu’s prescription that judges should be the law’s mouthpieces – the sovereign’s interference, said Garve, in the courts’ affairs certainly would amount to despotism. But in Prussia the courts were also competent in administrative economics, or cameralism. In this latter function they actually were called governments (Regierungen) and in this capacity were the implementing tools of the courts’ own orders. Garve argued that this blurred the line between the ceremonial practices of the law and a modern, trained, and therefore less ceremonial bureaucratic administration of the country.52 Therefore, it is here that the Prussian king would have to resist any infringement on his power. But Frederick II could separate the functions of law and administration in his newly conquered provinces only; in the old ones he had to settle for slow reform of the judicial process. Garve lauded the cautious way in which Frederick proceeded, for this king did not interfere – or rather almost never interfered – in the courts’ proper business, which was application of the law. At the same time, he king prepared his country against much opposition for the vast judicial reforms that would culminate in the seminal Prussian General Code (Allgemeine Land Recht) of 1794. Garve clearly found the Code to be the great accomplishment of Frederick’s personal rule, even if he thought that it was not without its flaws and that only the future could prove its practicality. Besides attributing to the king the initiative for judicial reforms, Garve credited him with appointing the philosophical scholars who prepared the actual reforms, protecting them against resistance from within the ranks of the judiciary, and sanctioning their completed work.53

It seems as if Garve wanted to say that what he thought of as Frederick’s moderation and wisdom had transformed the Prussian state into a kind of limited monarchy, where the autocratic prince did not interfere in the administration of the law, not out of personal virtue but because
the law did not allow him to. When elsewhere Garve compared the Prussian king with Marcus Aurelius, he clearly favoured the former; one important reason he gave for doing so was that the emperor’s weak constitutional position had made him more easily resort to tyrannical means to uphold his power. But Garve did not mention the watering down in the final version of the Prussian General Code of some of the constitutional provisions that had been included in the publicly debated draft versions of the 1780s.

What Garve actually did say, however, was far more modest: In all three cases in which this reformist king had been fighting with the powers of ceremony, it was only Frederick’s unique qualities that had made his personal rule admirable. Garve’s inevitable conclusion was that, in the case of a Frederick II, autocratic rule worked better than was to be feared, but in the case of a less wise and energetic ruler, it probably would have failed and the state would have fallen into the hands of persons less devoted to the common weal. Frederick was, for Garve, Fielding’s rare prince who combined moderation, wisdom, and goodness: Never were Prussians so happy as when they were under the dominion of this single master. Conversely, in summarizing the popular philosophers’ thinking on the matter, Garve found that there was perhaps no happier place in the whole world where a noble spirit could develop and show itself in all its grandeur than the one which Frederick II occupied, namely, that of the ruler of an absolute monarchy – adding, ‘however questionable that type of government might be.’ In short, under the conditions of absolute monarchy only the autocrat could develop the moral quality properly belonging to all citizens.

The three Prussian popular philosophers whose views have been presented here, Sulzer, Nicolai, and Garve, all found autocracy reprehensible because it deprived citizens of their moral integrity and autonomy. This judgment was not mitigated by the patriotic enthusiasm that they shared with many other Prussians for Frederick II as a person and as a military hero. The unique qualities they saw united in his person made Frederick II’s rule not only an exception to a defective form of government; by styling Frederick II an uncommon human being, they made him into a philosopher on the throne, and thus also set standards for other monarchs, in particular Frederick II’s own successors. Forging a union between the autocrat dedicated to both the Enlightenment and good government and the citizen-patriot devoted to the fatherland, the popular philosophers rectified the moral deficiency of the citizens and
put themselves in a position to measure autocrats against standards that they could not easily defy. Of course, criticism by the popular philosophers did not change the way in which Prussians were being ruled; it did, however, change the way in which the educated elite came to think about how they ought to be ruled.

Notes


5 Quoted in Ian Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments: Civil and Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge 2001), 256.


17 Sulzer, *Allgemeine Theorie*, III, 85 (*Künste, Schöne*).


19 Sulzer, *Allgemeine Theorie*, I, 114–18, here 115 (entry: *Die Alten*).

20 Ibid., III, 87 (*Künste, Schöne*).

21 Ibid., III, 88.

22 Ibid., I, 453–61, here at 457 (entry: *Character*).

23 Cf. ibid., I, 23–7 (entry: *Aehnlichkeit*).

24 Ibid., I, 460 (*Character*).


26 Sulzer, *Allgemeine Theorie*, III, 90 (*Künste, Schöne*). In France, Diderot, d’Alembert, and other members of Friedrich Melchior Grimm’s circle of *philosophes* systematically supported and promoted the work of the sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon both inside and outside of France as they ‘aspired to educate those in power and transform them into enlightened monarchs.’ Ulrike D. Mathies, ‘Houdon and the German Courts: Serving the Franco-


29 Isaak Iselin, Versuch über die gesellige Ordnung (Basel 1772), 113.

30 Nicolai to Iselin, 12 Nov. 1772, in Jacob-Friesen, Profile, 318–20.


32 Nicolai to Iselin, 18 Oct. 1774, in Jacob-Friesen, Profile, 381–2.

33 Ibid.


35 Friedrich Nicolai, Introduction to Anhang der Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek, vols. 25–6 (1780).


38 Garve, Fragmente, 288–9.

39 Ibid., 222.

40 Ibid., 161–76.


44 Ibid., 224–9.
46 Ibid., 238.
48 Ibid., 245.
49 Nicolai, *Anekdoten*, VI, 197.
51 Ibid., 253–60.
52 Similarly, Garve, ‘Vergleichung,’ 57.
53 Garve, *Fragmente*, 268.
54 Garve, ‘Vergleichung,’ 96.
56 Garve, ‘Vergleichung,’ 103.
chapter eleven

The Prussian Monarchy and the Practices of Enlightenment

MICHAEL SAUTER*

Prussia’s Edict on Religion created the biggest public political scandal in late eighteenth-century Germany. Registered on 9 July 1788, one year before the French Revolution started, it required Prussian clerics to teach Christianity’s fundamental truths only, which it defined as the divinity of Jesus, the truth of the Bible, and the triune God. Critics instantly charged the author of the edict, Johann Christoph Woellner, with attacking the Enlightenment. In a flurry of books and pamphlets, enlightened writers across the German states, such as Carl Friedrich Bahrdt, Ernst Christian Trapp, and Anton Friedrich Büsching, to name but a few, decried the edict as the Spanish Inquisition’s return and anointed Woellner the poster child of counter-enlightened reaction.¹

Taking their cues from such eighteenth-century polemics, historians since have pegged Woellner as a foe of the Enlightenment.² The problem with this view is not that it is completely untrue, but that historians have accepted it as completely true. If judged by the standards of its time, the edict was politically moderate, as it only prescribed what clergymen could say before their congregations and did not interfere in academic debate.³ Woellner himself was a product of Prussia’s most important enlightened institutions – both state and public. He had attended the University of Halle, reviewed numerous books for the Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek, and belonged to such social organizations as the Freemasons and the Montagsklub.⁴ To borrow a line from Margaret Jacob, Woellner lived the Enlightenment.⁵

This brief overview suggests a need for a more historically contextual reading of Woellner, the Edict on Religion, and opponents of both.⁶ In this chapter I trace Woellner’s career and the edict’s origins to the monarchical structures of Frederickian Prussia. Frederick II, who
reigned from 1740 to 1786, influenced intellectual and political developments across Europe. His relationship to the European Enlightenment and its Prussian variant is multi-faceted, and I will concentrate on only two aspects of it here. First, there is the idea, which arose already in the eighteenth century, that Frederick II’s authoritarian politics made vigorous public debate possible. With a large standing army to keep order, Frederick’s subjects could argue about anything, but especially about religious issues. In this context, of course, it helped that the king was a professed agnostic; debates that shook religious dogma could not wound this sovereign’s authority. Second, there is the Frederickian tradition of enlightened absolutist governance. Throughout his reign, but particularly after the Seven Years War (1756–1763), Frederick II’s administration made determined efforts to modernize the Prussian state by hiring experts to manage large segments of the economy.

Prussia, under Frederick II, nurtured two groups of elites, both of which had claims to the moniker ‘enlightened.’ First, the monarch’s agnosticism created, as many have argued, an intellectual elite that saw religious criticism as its preserve and autonomy as its right. Second, Frederick’s economic interventionism also created a bureaucratic elite that saw top-down reform as the guarantor of political order. During the last two decades of the eighteenth century, the two came into conflict.

The differences between these competing approaches to state and society have been interpreted until now in dichotomous terms: the Enlightenment versus the Counter-Enlightenment. This dichotomy oversimplifies the political and intellectual tensions of the period, for it associates the enlightened with the future and Woellner, for decades a ranking member of Prussia’s bureaucratic elite, with the past. This chapter will, however, break with this dichotomy in two ways. First, in placing Woellner into the political context of his time, it will show that his thought and actions were forward-looking. Second, it will establish that Woellner’s ideas on the maintenance of stability in both state and society were shaped as deeply by the Frederickian monarchy as were the ideas of his contemporary opponents: the divisions between them and Woellner were differences in emphasis in a shared worldview. Thus, this chapter will conclude that, to the extent that there was a fin-de-siècle conflict in eighteenth-century Prussia, it was a battle between what we today would call conservative and liberal strains of thought that had common origins in the reign of Frederick II.
Producing an Enlightened Absolutist

Woellner’s life can be seen as a microcosm of the educated elite’s progress through eighteenth-century Prussia. Born on 13 March 1732 in Döberitz, like many of his educated brethren Woellner was a pastor’s son. His father, also named Johann Christoph, and his mother, Dorothea Rosine, took great interest in his education. In spite of their limited means, they sent him to the local school in Spandau and paid for further private instruction as well. Encouraged by his parents and teacher, Woellner learned French, English, and Latin, and at eighteen left home for the University of Halle. This university, founded in 1694, had been the centre of Prussian Pietism and enlightened philosophy in the first half of the eighteenth century, producing preachers and philosophers who were both religious and attuned to the new rationalism.

We do not know what Woellner took from Halle. He studied with Christian Wolff and Siegmund Baumgarten, whose rationalism may have affected his views on religion, but of more we cannot be sure. His early post-university career, however, is more revealing. In 1753 he was hired as a tutor (Hofmeister) in the home of Lieutenant General August Friedrich von Itzenplitz (1693–1759), a rural nobleman held in great esteem by Frederick II. Two years later, the general nominated Woellner to be his court cleric (Hofprediger), an office he filled until 1759. In that fateful year not only did Woellner resign his position due to ill health, but also von Itzenplitz was killed at the Battle of Kunersdorf. Sophie von Itzenplitz, the general’s widow, then hired Woellner to finish her son’s education and made arrangements for financial support that allowed Woellner to study agronomy. By 1762 Woellner had become so knowledgeable on agricultural matters that he and the younger Itzenplitz leased the estate jointly.

Woellner’s agricultural experience made him an ideal candidate for Frederick II’s growing state apparatus. Reconstruction began immediately after the end of the Seven Years War, and agricultural reform was one of the state’s central concerns. In 1767 Woellner joined the Prussian administration as commissarius oeconomicus, supervising various economic projects, including land clearing, marsh drainage, and road building. Two years later, he accepted a commission to oversee the enclosure of Prussia’s common lands and to study the Dutch practice of using peat for fuel (Torfgräberei). This work brought him to the attention of Prince Henry, Frederick’s youngest brother, who employed him
During the 1760s and 1770s Woellner became a cog in Frederick II’s state machine, and his experience as a royal servant is decisive for understanding his ideas and public policies. Woellner’s work both as a clergyman and as an administrator impressed upon him the need to organize Prussia’s agriculture from the top down. To that end, he advocated state-led agricultural reforms using the latest – and in the context of the time enlightened – techniques, while also insisting on social control. As we will see, Woellner turned to clergics to maintain order, since they were the most important authority figures in the countryside. In this context, religious stability and rural agricultural reform converged, making both essential to enlightened governance.

Agriculture and Conservative Enlightenment

It is against the backdrop of Frederickian statism that we must consider Woellner’s connection to the Prussian Enlightenment. Not a thinker of European rank, Woellner was nevertheless an active participant in what historians have called the enlightened public sphere. The public sphere has become central to current understanding of the late eighteenth century, because this is where the emancipatory promise of the Enlightenment unfolded. The public sphere had two main aspects, print and sociability: Print was the world of newspapers, books, and correspondence; sociability included coffeehouses, salons, and Freemasonic lodges.

Woellner was deeply embedded in this Enlightened world. As much a product of print as any thinker in the eighteenth century, he published three major agricultural works during the 1760s, as well as regular reviews in the Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek. In 1763, for example, he translated into German Francis Home’s Foundations of Agriculture and Plant Growth, expressly noting that England was the model for agricultural reform. In 1766 he published The Enclosure of the Commons in the Mark of Brandenburg, Judged According to Its Economic Advantages, and in 1768, the Prize Essay on Peasant Ownership of Property, which Received Honorable Mention from the Royal Russian Economic Society in St Petersburg on May 1, 1768. In the latter two works Woellner argued that landowners should enclose and distribute common lands to the peasantry, since the increased productivity alone would defray the cost of the changes.

If print communication was a characteristic of Enlightened debate,
then Woellner’s agricultural writings associate him with the Enlightenment. Nonetheless, his writings also draw our attention to his social and political conservatism. Woellner did not write for peasants, but for their overseers.\(^{23}\) Ironically, this meant that he could be quite radical in his reform proposals, as he advocated allowing peasants to farm their allocated portions of the enclosed commons independently. But as his published sermons make clear, he did not take up these ideas with the peasants themselves; such issues were considered by him to be outside the bounds of their competence.\(^{24}\) Thus, in Woellner’s politics, his commitment to reform was inseparable from his conservatism.

Now we reach a point that has caused much confusion. If we accept the notion that in Prussia the Enlightenment was about expanding autonomy within the country’s existing monarchical confines, then Woellner has no place in the Enlightenment. To take this position amounts, however, to a wilful misunderstanding of Woellner’s agenda. A conservative Woellner was, but also a reformer who deliberately seeded autonomy within the monarchy’s structures. A closer look at his ideas reveals that he fashioned autonomy so that it would bring both economic and political benefits to the state – at least to his mind. It remains to consider how and why he was able to do this.

Like many of his enlightened brethren, Woellner believed that changes in the forms of production wrought changes in human behaviour. He argued, for example, that the peasant would work harder and be happier were he to own property (\textit{Eigentum}): ‘One single word, property, will be so powerful that millions of peasants will awake as out of a dream, bid their innate sluggishness goodnight at once, and become completely different people.’\(^{25}\) What gave property such transforming powers? – reason, though of a particular kind: ‘The peasant has his own understanding, as other people do. And he understands nothing more easily than what will increase his advantage.’\(^{26}\)

Woellner’s position does not put him on a par with enlightened luminaries such as Lessing, Herder, or Kant. Nonetheless, the point remains that Woellner developed a particular notion of the role of reason in rural life and called for policies that would exploit the abilities of the peasant under the new monarch.

Woellner’s behaviour as a landowner offers a view of his conservative reformism in action.\(^{27}\) In 1790 he purchased the village of Gross Rietz from the von der Marwitz family and proceeded to make large capital investments, which included building bridges, a brewery, a distillery, a cow barn, and a carp pond. His biggest reforms came, however, in agri-
cultural organization. In 1791 Woellner emancipated his serfs. He also reformed land tenure, as he had advocated in his own books, uniting splintered plots into larger units that encouraged rational farming. This allowed him to eliminate the old three-field system and to experiment with new fertilizing techniques. If we step back, for a moment, and consider Woellner in the context of the time, the irony obtrudes that Woellner completely reorganized village life along enlightened lines, even as he was supposedly extinguishing the Enlightenment.

Woellner’s agricultural thought represents, thus, an alliance between conservatism and reformism. His reforms came from above, leaving the peasants little more say in what happened. Even after emancipation, they were only relatively autonomous. Woellner’s peasants may have become freer through farming private plots, but they were not free. With the allocation of formerly common land came the reciprocal responsibility of obedience: as subjects of the state and also as tenants of the local lord. Woellner’s reforms were tailored to what he saw as the peasants’ needs and capacities. In Woellner’s world, the peasants enjoyed, at best, a tutored freedom; autonomy, whether of the religious or political variety, had no place here.

**Updating Enlightened Absolutism**

In 1786 Frederick II died. Much as had happened in France after the death of Louis XIV, Prussia heaved a collective sigh of relief when Frederick II’s unusually long and eventful reign ended. Still, there were some concerns among the Enlightened about the royal successor, Frederick William II. In their view the future king had surrounded himself with a cabal of the Unenlightened – led by Johann Christoph Woellner. Religiously conservative, Woellner personified the Counter-Enlightenment for many. Even worse, it seemed, on the first Sunday after his succession, the new monarch went to church, hearing a sermon by the theologically conservative court preacher Ludwig Ramm.

For those who saw themselves as the vanguard of the Enlightenment, an openly religious king was bad news. If lack of royal interest in religion had allowed the Prussian Enlightenment to flourish, then even a flicker of royal piety – which was all Frederick William ever offered – threatened the Enlightenment to the core. How accurate is this judgment? Was the mere presence of a Prussian king in church dangerous for the Enlightenment? Was royal intervention in religion truly out of place? The Enlightened canon says yes unequivocally to the latter two
questions. It is, therefore, important to reconsider the substance of Woellner’s influence over Frederick William II.

We must begin by noting some of the continuities that underlay Frederick William’s supposedly radical behaviour. Unnoticed at the time was that the king attended services in many different churches over the next few weeks. Frederick William heard sermons by preachers from a variety of traditions, including ones given by the Enlightened Johann Friedrich Zöllner and Friedrich Samuel Sack, the Pietist Johann Joachim Spalding, as well the orthodox Johann Baptiste Ambrosi. Frederick William was playing the traditional monarchical role of *Landesvater*, a paternal ruler who presided over all his people, regardless of their particular confessions. Of course, Prussia had a long tradition of diversity under paternal religious oversight, since the Hohenzollern dynasty had joined the Reformed church back in 1613, leaving a Calvinist family to rule over a largely Lutheran populace. Thus, in listening to different clerics around the city of Berlin, Frederick William was doing only what he ought to have, even if Woellner and his circle were behind the visits.

Against this backdrop we must consider Woellner’s role in shaping the new monarchy’s policies. I have already described how Woellner developed practical expertise while working for Frederick II during the 1760s. His rise through the ranks continued through the 1770s and was complete by the mid-1780s, by which time he was part of then Crown Prince Frederick William’s entourage. Although some people were critical of the relationship, there is reason to believe that the future king derived a good deal from the arrangement. For example, between 1784 and 1786, Woellner read a dozen lectures on public policy in order to familiarize Frederick William with the machinery of government. The future king was uninformed on such matters, since Frederick II had neglected his nephew’s education. Only nine of the original twelve lectures have survived, but the texts that remain convey the breadth of Woellner’s knowledge, as they cover topics ranging from the emancipation of serfs and Jews to tax, religious, commercial, and bureaucratic reform.

Woellner’s lectures are important for two reasons. First, they place him firmly in the late eighteenth-century’s world of public debate, betraying as they do a myriad of influences that go well beyond his agronomic studies, including cameralism and physiocracy. Second, they show how Woellner appropriated Frederick II’s enlightened absolutism, while offering a critical appraisal of it. A central aspect of this appropriation was, as we will see, the emphasis on religious stability. I will consider
only three of the lectures below, but even a truncated discussion will reveal that Woellner was a leading expert on state administration and that his ideas were embedded in Enlightened debate.

Woellner’s ‘Treatise on Serfdom’ (1784) reveals the continuity between his work as a rural clergyman, writer, and government administrator. In this text, he called for the abolition of serfdom, arguing that serfdom was nothing more than a medieval remnant, the removal of which was justified on moral grounds alone. Serfs were, according to Woellner, so wretched that any sensitive person would recoil before their squalor. This interest in rural living conditions was crucial, as Woellner always connected virtue and obedience in the countryside with the interests of the state. For example, in this lecture he argued that serfdom harmed the state by limiting population growth, dampening interest in agriculture, and making the people less obedient. As Woellner saw it, poor people did not multiply, did not farm, and did not respect authority.

The link between reform and the structures of the monarchy is evident in Woellner’s idea for a state-sponsored agricultural institution. Woellner proposed a government office that would send trained peasants into the countryside to educate their brethren. This proposal is important in two ways. First, it underscores how Woellner retained a naive optimism about the power of reason to effect change. The idea was to have peasants go into the countryside, teach their countrymen rational farming methods, and leave the rest to the individual’s reason. Second, this diffusion of new, more rational methods was to occur without print. Peasants were to learn through watching people whom the state had trained, not through independent reading and discussion. Peasants could then independently apply what they had been taught, but they were not to acquire new knowledge by themselves.

We should pause here to put Woellner’s ideas into a Prussian context. An agricultural office that employed trained peasants would have been a natural extension of the reform policies of both Frederick II and Prince Henry. If Woellner and others brought back new techniques through their investigations of farming practices in other countries, it remained to ensure the distribution of this new information within Prussia. Second, we must confront the stark and informed practicality of Woellner’s proposal. As agricultural reformers everywhere found out, peasants were hardly voracious readers. Hence, a reform office of this type was probably the only way to communicate new agricultural techniques to the farming populace. In this sense, Woellner seems to have understood something that his Enlightened critics did not.
Woellner’s ‘Treatise on Finances’ (1784) highlights another key aspect of his thought: his recognition that Prussia’s economic circumstances had changed and that new policies were required to address them.38 Woellner kept abreast of economic developments, relying mainly on physiocratic and cameralist ideas to formulate his positions.39 He argued, for example, that trade in useful goods brought gold into the country.40 This position may be standard eighteenth-century economics, but Woellner’s ideas on tax policies contain a few interesting twists. Woellner held that Prussia needed to tax more of its wealth. In his view, the rich did not pay sufficient taxes.41 The nobility owned huge tracts of land on which they paid nothing, and merchants paid no taxes on their vast stocks of goods. To remedy this situation, Woellner proposed a tax plan in which indirect taxes, which fell most heavily on the peasants, would be lowered in exchange for an increase in direct taxes on wealth. The peasants would benefit, of course, but the state would be the real beneficiary, since it would reap the benefits of additional income without having to worry about peasant disobedience.

Throughout his lectures Woellner brought a critical perspective to the legacy of Frederick II. Consider another tax proposal he made, during his talk on finances, to reinstate the head tax. Traditionally, this was a minimum payment levied on each person in Prussia. Frederick II had eliminated the head tax as part of his financial reforms.42 It is possible, therefore, to see Woellner’s desire to return to this tax as reactionary. Yet, Woellner’s plan updated the old system to benefit a new situation.43 Traditionally, the head tax was paid by three classes – known as formal, middle, and popular – with the formal class paying the most and the popular class paying the least. Woellner, however, held that the new economic situation required a fourth class of taxpayer, the capitalist (his term), who would pay the highest rate. In this way, the state would require all people to contribute at least minimally to the state’s maintenance, while relieving the middle class (Mittelstand) of what he saw as an unfair burden. As was the case in Gross Rietz, Woellner demonstrated almost progressive instincts at the very moment when he was being a reactionary.

Having considered Woellner’s tax and agricultural policies, let us turn to his religious ones. In 1785 Woellner presented his lecture ‘Treatise on Religion’ to the crown prince.44 One historian has argued that this text was Woellner’s ‘war plan’ against the Enlightenment.45 This characterization reflects the ideological concerns of Woellner’s critics more than it does Woellner’s world-view. Woellner did oppose religious criti-
cism that he deemed destructive of order, but that does not mean his policies were reactionary. On the contrary, much like in the case of his economic works, Woellner’s ‘Treatise on Religion’ was an attempt to update traditional thought for new conditions.

Woellner held, in this treatise, that religion maintained order in a state where the authorities could not monitor everyone. Religion filled the gap between the will of the person in authority and the unwillingness of people to do what they ought, by teaching them the consequences of not doing their duty. Soldiers kept discipline in battle and ordinary subjects worked conscientiously every day because they knew it was their duty to do so. Religion was, therefore, an integral part of the modern state’s system of production, and this made disrespect of religion politically dangerous.

Woellner’s attempt to control religious practice was, therefore, an attempt to put religion at the service of the state. This has two implications. First, Woellner was no reactionary, but rather, a conservative critic of a regime that had reached its limits. Woellner was, indeed, religious, but it is notable that he never argued that Christianity should be defended solely because it was true, but always emphasized its public utility. This leads to the second point. Woellner was conservative rather than orthodox in his religious positions. His prescriptions for renewal were based on a critical assessment of the state’s problems and their causes: he may have believed in God, but he worked for another lord.

**Sociability, Conservatism, and the Enlightenment**

Over the past twenty years or so, historians have focused on the increase in sociability during the eighteenth century as indicative of a fundamental shift away from the old regime’s social forms. Looking at salons, reading clubs, patriotic societies, and especially Freemasonic lodges, historians have argued that these ‘private’ clubs were the soil from which modernity sprang. In theory, men and women associated in these clubs without reference to social orders and cultivated a conceptual realm in which reason determined the value of social and political structures. As the story goes, sociability had a leavening effect on early modern notions of order, and it created the conditions under which political upheaval became possible.

From this perspective, Freemasonry was the enlightened organization par excellence. Masonic lodges provided a new social space in which
people could define themselves independently of traditional religious and political forms. Masons were well educated, widely read, and usually devoted themselves to the Enlightened cult of reason. These behaviours and attitudes eventually spilled over into the political realm, as calls for reform or even revolution. Margaret Jacob has shown, for example, how Freemasonic lodges encouraged behavioural patterns in France and the Netherlands that dominated the French revolutionary period. As Jacob puts it, living the Enlightenment meant fighting battles over rules and constitutions, through which lodge members gained an intimate knowledge of the forms of political power. Being conversant in the language of conflict prepared men (usually) for revolution when the opportunity arose.

Although there is a good deal of truth to this interpretation, eighteenth-century sociability did not guarantee that all men would become revolutionary opponents of the old regime. Woellner, for example, began as a Freemason before moving towards the more conservative Rosicrucians. The problem with the traditional interpretation of Woellner as reactionary is that his move away from Freemasonry was a product of the same sociability that elsewhere produced revolutionaries. Woellner’s experience with enlightened sociability highlights how people could draw conservative implications from the same conditions that in others produced revolutionary attitudes.

At one time, Woellner was an important part of the Freemasonic movement in Prussia. In 1765 he joined Aux Trois Globes, Berlin’s largest lodge, and rapidly rose through the ranks to positions of responsibility. His rise to prominence is not surprising, since Woellner was a recognized agricultural expert. Having already published two books on agriculture – one was the translation of Home – his third book would appear in 1766. Moreover, by 1768 he would be working for Frederick II, and by 1770 for Prince Henry. Woellner’s importance within Freemasonry is evident in that he represented the Berlin lodges regularly at Freemasonic conferences: in 1771 he travelled to the Pförten (Lausitz) conference; in 1773 he attended the Berlin conference, acting as conference secretary as well; in 1775 he was at Braunschweig; and in 1776 he attended the Wiesbaden gathering.

Woellner was obviously an active Freemason, intimately involved in a variety of organizational matters. If organizational disputes prepared Freemasons for revolutionary activity, why did Woellner not become a revolutionary? German Freemasons confronted many of the same issues that fascinated their brethren in Strasbourg. Which lodges owed fealty
to which others? Who should be a member, and how many membership grades should there be? Woellner was in the middle of these debates. Unlike those Freemasons that turned to revolution in the name of reason, however, Woellner’s background led him to seek religious and political stability, an agenda that manifested itself in his turn to Rosicrucianism. Rosicrucianism fits into Woellner’s world of rural economic reform: it was an elite organization that also emphasized religious orthodoxy.

For many historians Woellner’s Rosicrucianism explains the Edict on Religion completely. There is, however, reason to question this approach. First, the Rosicrucians remained an elite organization in spite of their supposed break with Freemasonry. Woellner and his colleagues kept their organization small, and there is no evidence to suggest that anyone wished to include average people among the group’s members. In fact, Woellner would have been completely against it. Second, although this detail has often been forgotten, Woellner and his associates were officially Frederick William II’s superiors within the Rosicrucian organization, which meant that the Rosicrucians actually inverted existing political hierarchies, in spite of their reactionary reputation. Third, Woellner’s collection of Rosicrucian lore, which was published after his death, reveals that Rosicrucians were Scottish Rite Freemasons devoted to traditional Christianity. If Rosicrucians broke with Freemasons over the limits of reason, they continued to operate with rituals and lore that had created the Freemasons’ independent social space.

Woellner’s experience with enlightened sociability also suggests a larger point: Woellner has been the victim of repeated attempts to read history backwards. The Edict on Religion was promulgated a full year before the outbreak of the French Revolution. The desire among historians to see the revolution as a progressive – if destructive – event has, however, meant that pre-revolutionary conservatism came to be identified with post-revolutionary reaction. There is, in this view, a direct line from Woellner to, say, the Carlsbad Decrees of 1819. However, as Klaus Epstein argued more than forty years ago, German conservatism had multiple origins, all of which date well back into the early modern period. My point here is to note, first, that conservatism and enlightenment were not mutually exclusive, and second, that since Woellner’s conservatism predated the French Revolution, modern (and backward-looking) normativism does not apply to him. We need to look elsewhere for a satisfactory explanation of Woellner’s policies.
The Edict on Religion

Having explored Woellner’s relationship to the themes and institutions often considered characteristic of the Enlightenment, we are now in a better position to understand the Edict on Religion. The edict is usually perceived as an attack on the Enlightenment by a new, conservative monarchy. Yet, if we read it without the ideological baggage, two things become apparent. First, the law is moderate in tone. It did nothing to prevent academic discussion, since it prohibited religious speculation only before uneducated audiences. This may not seem particularly enlightened to us, but it was an informed assessment of the conditions that confronted the Prussian monarchy. Second, the edict was as much a political diagnosis as a religious manifesto. Most interpreters have assumed that the edict was only about religion. This has, unfortunately, meant Woellner’s exclusion from the Prussian Enlightenment, since it is assumed that enlightenment began with religious debate. The structure of Prussia’s monarchy guaranteed, however, that no state action was simply concerned with religion and that secular activities did not leave religious questions untouched. To understand the Edict on Religion as part of a public debate, we must read it as an attempt to determine the proper role of religion in a state confronting the forces of change.

Woellner’s edict made religion the monarchical state’s prerogative. The belief that this was unenlightened is based on Frederick II’s reputation for a complete lack of interest in religion. This is only half right. Frederick II may have been a doctrinal sceptic, but he maintained his right to oversee religion and would never have allowed a cleric to subvert state authority by preaching subversive doctrines. Whereas Frederick II allowed people to argue about religion as long as they obeyed, Woellner expected them to obey and remain silent, or as he put it in the edict: ‘as long as each person fulfills his duties quietly as a good citizen (Bürger) and keeps his particular opinions to himself, while carefully guarding against disseminating his beliefs or persuading others.’ If religious doctrine was a bulwark of state security, protecting religion from enlightened criticism was as enlightened as any call for more religious criticism.

Even if we accept the notion that any interference in religious practice was unenlightened, there are still perspectives from which the edict appears enlightened. Consider that, for the first time in Prussian history, an edict guaranteed in law the practice of non-Protestant faiths. Until
then, other faiths had been tolerated only at the monarch’s pleasure. (This was especially the case for Jews.) Thus, as Woellner saw the edict, Prussian subjects were now legally free to worship quietly. Moreover, only clerics were subject to state control, and since they were state servants, that oversight was justified.

In seeking to control religious expression, Woellner put his finger on problems that had become central during the time of Frederick: How far should education go? What rights and duties did Bürger have? How far could freedom go without undermining political order? Woellner’s answer was to put the state’s interest in stability before the autonomy of the enlightened elite. Unfortunately, neither his enlightened contemporaries – nor modern historians – have forgiven him this transgression. Woellner may or may not have been unenlightened, but he worked in what he believed to have been the state’s interest. This is why he saw a need to support the clergy, whom he considered to be a bulwark against disorder. Consider this phrase from the edict: ‘No one should despise, deride, or disparage the clerical order, [behaviour] we have constantly noted with great displeasure, and which in our opinion we cannot leave unpunished, since too often this unavoidably encourages the despising of religion itself.’ Woellner, clergymen were fundamental to daily life in Prussia. It is, therefore, difficult to say whether attempts to control them after the death of Frederick II were as unenlightened as has been generally assumed. It is not the historian’s role to determine whether Woellner was truly enlightened. What we can say, however, is that Woellner was as much a product of the Prussian monarchy as were any of his enlightened contemporaries. In the end, therefore, it is much more important to understand how Woellner chose from among the competing Frederickian traditions, while patching together his own world-view.

**Conclusion**

Historians have known for some time that most Germans wore their monarchism comfortably at the eighteenth-century’s end. Much to the chagrin of some Marxist historians, there were few German Jacobins. Hence, when the French Revolution broke out, Germans were happy to celebrate its achievements, as long as those remained on the other side of the Rhine – a feeling that only intensified when the revolution turned to violence and aggression. German resistance to French republicanism
may have been due to the success of German absolutism, as C.B.A. Behrens has suggested was the case for Prussia, or it may have been the result of its being French.\(^{64}\) Certainly the revolutionary occupation of German soil did not help matters, as Fichte’s ‘Addresses to the German Nation,’ delivered in 1806 in occupied Berlin, made clear. Furthermore, it does seem safe to suggest, as Karl Wegert has done, that the French invasion overwhelmed local German approaches to good governance, most of which excluded direct public participation.\(^{65}\) At the very least, the historiography on early modern Germany has progressed far enough that we can stop blaming Germans for not having demanded a republic in 1789.

Recognizing the extent of monarchist sentiment in Germany is essential for understanding the politics of the Enlightenment in late eighteenth-century Prussia. Whatever else the fight over the Edict on Religion was about, it was not about whether average people should be autonomous, free of state tutelage. All sides were united in the belief that state control over the populace was necessary. The fight was, in fact, about how much autonomy the educated bureaucratic elite should enjoy within the Prussian state. In essence, the battle over the Edict on Religion was really a contest between conservatisms. In my view, the gap between the two sides is, therefore, too narrow to qualify for the apocalyptic Enlightenment/Counter-Enlightenment dichotomy that is normally ascribed to it.

More importantly, perhaps, putting the Prussian debate about the Edict on Religion in the context of monarchism highlights its historically specific nature. What enlightenment there was in Prussia – and especially Berlin – was shaped by Frederick II’s long and eventful reign. Frederick II’s agnosticism and his taste for life in Potsdam encouraged some in the Berlin Enlightenment such as Friedrich Nicolai to envision freedom of religious criticism and distance from the king as heralding the beginning of Enlightenment. But Frederick’s repeated wars and the accompanying drive to improve the state’s finances put rational reform on the public agenda as well. Here the king’s direct interest in matters of state suggested a completely different relationship between Enlightenment and the monarchy. Enlightenment here meant improving state oversight in all matters, including religion.

Johann Christoph Woellner’s career is, of course, my test case in this chapter, and through him I have made a two-fold argument. First, in Prussia the Enlightenment was thoroughly embedded in the structures of the
Prussian monarchical state. There is no understanding Enlightenment in Prussia without recognizing the intellectual framework that the monarchy established for all its subjects. Second, Woellner’s belief in the efficacy of religious oversight, especially in the countryside, was a legitimate and enlightened outcome of the world that Frederick II had helped to make. Nothing that Woellner believed about the populace was incompatible with the Prussian Enlightenment’s approach to politics. Moreover, his conservatism and reformism fit neatly into an activist eighteenth-century monarchy. If Frederick II nurtured the Enlightenment by giving free rein to religious debate, he also fostered enlightened reform through state oversight in the countryside. In any event, the battle over the Edict on Religion was the last vestige of a monarchy that, as Theodor Schieder has noted, produced more than a few contradictions.

Notes

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1 Carl Friedrich Bahrdt, Das Religions-Edikt. Ein Lustspiel in Fünf Aufzügen. Eine Skizze. Von Nicolai dem Jüngern (Thenakel [Vienna] 1789). This text is also available in English as The Edict of Religion: A Comedy and the Story and Diary of My Imprisonment, trans. by John Christian Laursen and Johan van der Zande (Lanham 2000); Anton Friedrich Büsching, D. Anton Friedrich Buesching, Koenigl. Preuss. Oberconsistorialraths, Untersuchung, Wenn und Durch Wen der Freyen Evangelische-Lutherischen Kirche die Symbolischen Buecher Zuerst Aufgelegt Worden? (Berlin 1789); Ernst Christian Trapp, Ueber die Gewalt Protestantischer Regenten in Glaubenssachen von E. Chr. Trapp (Braunschweig 1788). A microfilm collection of almost every text written both for and against the edict is


3 For an examination of how the edict perpetuated Prussia’s traditional *Religionspolitik*, which had long prescribed religious practices in the name of public order, see Ian Hunter, ‘Kant’s Religion and Prussian Religious Policy,’ *Modern Intellectual History* 2 (2005): 1–27. It should also be noted that the edict officially tolerated Jews and heterodox Christian faiths, such as Moravians, for the first time under Prussian law. This is why Otto Hintze called the edict a *Toleranzedikt* in his classic *Die Hohenzollern und Ihr Werk: Fünfhundert Jahre Vaterländischer Geschichte* (Berlin 1915), 415.

4 Woellner was a member of the *Montagsklub* from 1781 to 1792. As a Freemason, he was a member of the Berlin lodge ‘Aux Trois Globes’ or ‘Zu den Drei Weltkugeln.’ See Preuss, ‘Zur Beurtheilung.’


7 See Theodor Schieder, *Friedrich der Grosse: ein Königstum der Widersprüche* (Frankfurt 1983). This is still the best book on Frederick II and his reign.


11 See Henri Brunschwig for a remarkably compact view of this kind of enlightenment, Enlightenment and Romanticism in Eighteenth-Century Prussia (Chicago 1974).


16 ADB 24, 148–58; Wilhelm Abraham Teller, Denkschrift auf den Herrn Staatsminister von Woellner (Berlin 1802). Not everyone had a high opinion of Woellner’s work. Commenting on Woellner’s Preisschrift wegen der eigenthümlichen Besitzungen der Bauern, one reviewer concluded: ‘If the bureaucrats know nothing more than what is in this work, Lord have mercy on the poor farmers!’ This is cited in Holger Böning and Reinhart Siegert, Volksaufklärung: bibliographisches Handbuch zur Popularisierung aufklärerischen Denkens im deutschen Sprachraum von den Anfängen bis 1850 (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstadt 1990), 773.


19 The fundamental work on sociability is Reinhart Koselleck, Kritik und Krise: eine Studie zu Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt (Baden-Baden 1959). See also van Dülmen, Die Gesellschaft der Aufklärer, and Jacob, Living the Enlightenment.

21 Johann Christoph Woellner, *Die Aufhebung der Gemeinheiten in der Mark Brandenburg nach ihren grossen Vortheilen ökonomisch betrachtet* (Berlin 1766). Woellner, *Preisschrift wegen der eigenthümlichen Besitzungen der Bauern; welche bey der Russischkayserl., freyen ökonomischen Gesellschaft zu St Petersburg den ersten May 1768 das Accessit erhalten* (Berlin 1768). Woellner’s contribution to the St Petersburg Economic Society’s competition is notable for, among other things, sharing fundamental assumptions with many of the other replies, namely, that the peasant was a rational person motivated by dreams of gain. See, Böning and Siegert, *Volksaufklärung*.

22 On Frederick II’s agricultural policies and their limits, see Johnson, *Frederick*, 237–41.

23 Holger Böning has argued that the *Volksaufklärung* changed its approach to educating the peasants during the second half of the eighteenth century. Having begun with naive optimism about the ability of peasants to comprehend the lessons that they proffered, the *Volksaufklärer* retreated over time to an elite discussion among themselves on behalf of the peasants’ interests. This was never the case for Woellner, as the peasants were never equals for him. See Böning and Siegert, *Volksaufklärung*, xxxiv–xlvii.

24 Woellner’s sermons are a good example. The central theme in all of them is obedience to political authority. See Woellner, *Predigten* (Berlin 1789).


26 Woellner, *Aufhebung*, 99. The reader will note that I have used the word ‘understanding’ in the quoted translation. This is, because Woellner’s text uses the word *Verstand* – normally translated as ‘understanding’ – rather than *Vernunft*, which is usually translated as ‘reason.’ For simplicity’s sake, I have not dealt with the difference in the text. I should note here, however, that Woellner’s decision to use *Verstand*, when he could have written *Vernunft*, underscores my broader point about autonomy: *Verstand* does not connote independence the way that *Vernunft* does.

27 This paragraph is based on Klaus Koldrack, ‘Mit Fontane nach Gross Rietz: Wer War Johann Christoph Woellner?’ *Landkreis-Oder Spree* GB 221/93 (1993): 26–32.


33 GStA PK, I. HA Rep. 92 Woellner I, Nr 4 Abhandlung von der Leibeigenschaft (M).

34 Ibid., Bl. 8VR.

35 Ibid., Bl. 16R.

36 See n32.

37 See the Introduction in Böning and Siegert, *Volksaufklärung.*

38 GStA PK. I. HA Rep. 96, Nr 206A Abhandlung von den Finanzen (M).

39 At this point, there is only evidence for Woellner having a secondhand knowledge of major English, French, and German works on economics. This evidence comes from his reviews of German collections of excerpts and reviews of economic texts. Such compendia were fairly popular, and Woellner reviewed a number of them. See, e.g., Woellner: ‘Review of *Oekonomische Bibliothek oder Verzeichniß der neuesten und besten deutschen Bücher und Schriften,*

40 This position was, of course, a staple of German cameralism and its absolutist governance; see, esp., Tribe, Governing Economy.

41 GStA PK. I. HA Rep. 96, Nr 206A Abhandlung von den Finanzen (M), Bl. 85–88.

42 Ibid., Bl. 120–6.

43 Ruppel-Kuhfuss, Das Generaldirektorium.


45 Schwartz, Kulturkampf, 72–92.


48 On this question, see esp. Koselleck, Kritik und Krise, and Jacob, Living the Enlightenment.


50 Jacob, Living the Enlightenment.

51 See Gerlach, ‘Die Berliner Freimaurer.’ Gerlach’s subtle analyses of Freema-sonry and Rosicrucianism’s structure and membership have influenced my

52 ADB 24: 148–58. This article has a useful discussion of Woellner’s time as a Freemason.

53 The texts in question are Home, Grundsätze (1763); Woellner, Aufhebung (1766); Johann Christoph Woellner, Unterricht zu einer kleiner und auserlesenen oekonomischen Bibliothek bestehend in einer Anzeige der besten oekonomischen Bücher und derer vornehmsten in grössern Wercken zerstreuet befindlichen Abhandlungen über alle Theile der Landwirthschaft (Berlin 1764).

54 Ludwig Hammermeyer, Der Wilhelmsbader Freimaurer-Konvent von 1782 (Heidelberg 1980), 41.

55 Jacob, Living the Enlightenment.

56 Woellner, Der Signatstern, oder die enthüllten sämmtlichen sieben Grade und Geheimnisse der mystischen Freimaurerei nebst dem Orden der Magus oder Ritter des Lichts; mit allen geheimen Schriftzeichen, mysteriösen Ceremonien, wundervollen Operationen u.s.w., 2 vols. (Freiburg [reprint] 1979).


58 Schwartz, Kulturkampf is a classic example.


60 Acten, Urkunden und Nachrichten zur neuesten Kirchengeschichte 1 (1788): 465.

61 Birtsch, ‘Religions- und Gewissensfreiheit,’ 192.

62 Acten, 477.


66 Schieder, Friedrich der Grosse.
German historians disagree about the use of the term ‘enlightened absolutism.’ A detailed examination of the problems associated with this historiographical category has recently been provided by Günter Birtsch. Unlike the French despotisme éclairé or despotisme legal, the German term aufgeklärter Absolutismus did not originate in eighteenth-century political debates. It was introduced in 1847 by the political economist Wilhelm Roscher in describing the last of three stages of European absolutism, as represented by enlightened monarchs such as Frederick the Great of Prussia or Joseph II of Austria. Roscher’s analysis of absolutism has been criticized and refined by many; nevertheless, the definition of enlightened absolutism remains contested to this day.

In his contribution to a volume examining European perspectives on enlightened absolutism, Helmut Reinalter explained that it is important to distinguish between two different standpoints. The first takes enlightened absolutism to be a moderated version of monarchy, characterized by the intention of a monarch who aspires to use his power in accordance with the ideals of Enlightenment. The second holds that the monarch, instead, uses Enlightenment as an ideology to further consolidate his own position. In this view, enlightened absolutism represents the culminating point of a political system that is characterized by rationality and efficiency. Both perspectives find that Enlightenment and absolutism are conflicting notions and, thus, difficult to combine. Enlightenment is associated with the critique of authoritarian rule and with liberty, while absolutism denotes unlimited exercise of the supreme power that rests in a monarch. Thus, the monarch can either utilize Enlightenment against itself to further his own power or take Enlighten-
ment seriously and, in doing so, pave the way for putting his rule into question.² Such contradictions led Birtsch to conclude that enlightened absolutism is a ‘conceptual blunder of historiography.’ He proposed that we dismiss the concept altogether and replace it with ‘reform absolutism.’³ Birtsch’s proposal has not been generally accepted. Many historians continue to use ‘enlightened absolutism’ to designate and characterize a specific epoch of absolutist rule.⁴ In general, they draw no clear distinction between the form of government and the style of rule. Therefore, as it turns out, enlightened absolutism is not confined to discussions of monarchies. Rolf Graber, for example, spoke of enlightened absolutism when describing the style of rule in some Swiss city republics in the late eighteenth century.⁵

I propose to introduce a fresh approach to the concept of enlightened absolutism, in accordance with Frank Grunert’s argument that we need to distinguish between the business of the historian and the business of the historian of political thought. Birtsch may well be right to argue that enlightened absolutism does not qualify as a suitable concept to describe the political realities of the ancien régime; this does not imply, however, that it cannot be used to account for certain kinds of political theories.⁶ Grunert demonstrated that the theory of the state of Christian Thomasius (1655–1728) is a theory of enlightened absolutism.⁷ In a similar vein, I am going to demonstrate how, in the second half of the eighteenth century, ‘German’ political writers invented a theory of the state that characteristically combines Enlightenment and absolutist rule. It will soon become clear that these writers had in mind not a style of rule, but a form of government, namely, a specific type of monarchy.

It needs to be stressed at the outset that my focus is on only one variant of monarchism. Political historians such as Diethelm Klippel and Horst Dreitzel account for the concepts of enlightened or reform absolutism in terms of the theory of natural law. Martin Fuhrmann and Klippel have explained that the contractual theory of the state could easily be used to legitimize the unlimited power of the king, since the idea of natural individual rights was not used to limit the powers of the state.⁸ Instead, as in the natural law theories of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the powers of the state were determined by the ends of the state, which were frequently defined as the promotion of common felicity (gemeinschaftliche Glückseligkeit). On this basis it was easy to legitimize the extensive supervision and tutelage of the king’s subjects. In the 1780s, critiques of this conception of the state began to emerge marking
the transition to liberal theories of the state. Dreitzel dismissed enlightened absolutism as a meaningful category of political thought, yet seemed to agree in substance with Fuhrmann and Klippel – thus, he described the Prussian monarchy under Frederick II as ‘absolute’ government.9 Absolutist theory is to be further distinguished from the new variations of monarchism that were developed to account for the transformation of absolute monarchies into limited ones: The two main variations are constitutionalism and reform absolutism, which prepared the way for the liberal absolutism that Carl Gottlieb Svarez and Immanuel Kant advocated, for example.10

In this chapter, I concentrate on a different theory of monarchy, one that does not fit into this picture. It was introduced by Thomas Abbt (1738–1766) in 1761. As is widely acknowledged, ideas on human rights and liberty started to be publicly debated in the German Empire from around 1760.11 It is also well known that Swiss writers such as Isaak Iselin and Johann Georg Zimmermann played an important role in these debates, and their publications are usually treated as contributions to the developing ‘German’ public discourse.12 Until recently, however, the Swiss – that is, republican – context of their political writings has been largely ignored, which would explain why it has gone unnoticed that comparisons between republic and monarchy were at the core of these debates. This chapter will show that the contest between the governing systems of the Swiss republics and that of monarchical Prussia was, in effect, the point of departure in a far-reaching debate on the best form of government. Monarchists attempted to demonstrate that liberty and patriotism – formerly reserved to republics – could be reconciled with monarchy. One result of these debates, which extended beyond the French Revolution, was the invention of a full-blown theory of enlightened monarchy designed to rule out the republic as the best form of government.

I present my argument in three steps. First, through an examination of the works of Abbt and Zimmermann I identify the invention of a new type of monarchy in the 1760s. Second, I show how this theory was further developed in the 1780s by Klein and Kant, grounded on the premise that, in contrast to other European governments, Frederick II granted his subjects freedom of thought and freedom of the press. I then turn to Eberhard and Wyss to elucidate on what grounds the Prussian monarchy was advocated as the best form of government, as opposed to the one remaining stronghold of ‘ancient’ republicanism, the Swiss republics. I conclude by submitting that, as historians of politi-
Inventing a New Type of Monarchy: Abbt and Zimmermann

During the Seven Years War, Thomas Abbt’s polemical pamphlet, *Vom Tode für das Vaterland* (On Death for the Fatherland), was published in Prussia. In it, Abbt urged Prussians to sacrifice their lives in defence of the realm. He claimed that subjects of a monarchy could be just as proud of their ‘fatherland’ as could citizens of a republic. Moreover, he argued, patriotism was not exclusive to republics, but could also be an attribute of a well ordered monarchy. More than likely, Abbt was deeply impressed by Frederick II’s rule, yet he did not point to that monarch’s achievements in any direct way. Instead, he framed his appeal as a more general argument directed against Montesquieu’s classification of the forms of government.

Montesquieu’s distinction between republic, monarchy, and despotism as the three main forms of government stems from a combination of two criteria. The first is sovereignty. While in a republic sovereignty belongs either to the body of the people (democracy) or to a part of the people (aristocracy), in the other two forms of government, it belongs to just one person. In a monarchy the holder of supreme power governs according to established and published laws, whereas the despot rules arbitrarily. Montesquieu also considered the principles of the three forms of government, postulating that republics are driven by patriotism, monarchies by honour, and despotism by fear. These distinctions served as the starting point for the German debates on the best form of government – debates involving republican Swiss writers and monarchical Prussians. (Montesquieu’s account of the English constitution as a model of free government, in which power is checked by power, was of only minor importance here.)

In Switzerland, the political debates were already at their height when Abbt published his pamphlet. Throughout the eighteenth century, the Swiss republics were regarded as the last viable examples of the ‘ancient’ type of virtuous republic, in contrast to the new commercial politics of the large European trading monarchies. Yet by the middle of the century many Swiss thinkers shared the realization that the traditional means that had so far guaranteed Swiss independence were becoming obsolete. They agreed with Montesquieu, who had explained in *The Spirit of the Laws* that commerce and wealth undermined the moral
foundations of a republic. To uphold patriotism, a republic needed not only to be small, but it also depended on economic equality. Without excluding the possibility that trading republics could yet make it under current conditions Montesquieu insisted that their continuing survival would require the strict regulation of wealth and the suppression of luxury. The Swiss took Montesquieu’s theory of the republic as the point from which to rethink the relationship between the political ideals of republicanism and the realities of the modern world of commerce. It seemed important to them to do so, because, from their perspective, the ruling aristocracies in republics such as Geneva, Basel, Berne, and Zurich were about to forfeit patriotism. Thus, they felt compelled to address the question of how the vanishing political virtue of patriotism might be renewed.18

One response to the new realities was to remind the ruling aristocracies of the traditional republican values. This strategy was adopted by Johann Georg Zimmermann (1728–1795), who wrote his 1758 essay Vom Nationalstolze (On National Pride) to extol the republic as the best form of government. The republican constitution deserved a nation’s pride, he said, because it secured liberty. In accordance with Montesquieu, Zimmermann emphasized that to uphold liberty, the citizens of a republic needed to be virtuous. Drawing a distinction between exclusive and just national pride, he characterized patriotism as just and reasonable national pride. Zimmermann’s essay is full of critical remarks about the Swiss republics of the day. But his praise of the republican form of government was meant as a warning that the Swiss republics were about to lose their liberty, because the patriotism of their ruling aristocracies had vanished.19

As Abbt himself later explained, he used Zimmermann’s essay as a model for his On Death for the Fatherland.20 Abbt saw liberty and patriotism as the outstanding qualities of the best form of government but contested the notion that these qualities were exclusive to the republic. In defence of his claim that the motivating force of patriotism could also work in a monarchy, Abbt used four main arguments. First, he denied that republic and monarchy were opposed to each other, arguing that this was true only at those times in history when a monarch and a despot were one and the same. A monarchy could be a ‘fatherland’ if it allowed a certain degree of liberty, posited Abbt, and in stark contrast to Montesquieu, he held that liberty did not depend on the ‘constitution of the state.’ Thus, it was of no concern to Abbt whether legislation was exercised by all citizens together or by one single person or whether
supreme power was united in one person or divided. Liberty, he said, depended exclusively on whether the will of the ruler(s) was guided ‘by good, by great insights.’

Abbt developed this argument further in his second major work, *Vom Verdienste* (*On Merit*), which was published in 1764 and read widely in the German Empire, in addition to being well received in Switzerland. Here he demonstrated how every man might become a useful member of society. A man could earn merit through actions motivated by benevolence and by which the well-being of others was promoted, Abbt explained, and then he described several types of meritorious actions at length. At the end of this book he returned to the political questions that he had addressed in his earlier work. Here, although he devoted but ‘the first lines’ to the subject of politics, the direction of his argument is nevertheless clear. Abbt pointed out that to earn merit, people needed to be in social and political conditions that allowed them to make proper use of their abilities. In this context, he introduced a distinction between the ‘liberty of man’ and ‘civil liberty.’ Setting the former in contrast to two kinds of slavery – that of the servant and that of the compulsory laborer – while acknowledging that both kinds prevented people from becoming useful members of their society. To guarantee that, in their society, men could earn merit, ‘liberty of man’ had to be secured by ‘civil liberty,’ and where that was not the case, the society – or country – could not be said to be free: ‘A country, in which not every man is secured in his liberty of man by civil liberty, cannot be called free.’

This leaves a question, of course: What kind of government best assures liberty? Abbt observed that citizens who have nothing to do with their government did need not concern themselves with this question, as long as they could count on a ‘good master’; he admitted, however, that it was not always the case that they could. In his ‘first lines,’ Abbt did not answer this crucial question. Nevertheless, he provided some indications of what his response would include in the chapter on the merits of writers, artists, and preachers. There Abbt drew the attention of readers to works that ‘are written to enlighten kings and rulers as well as their highest civil servants.’ He explained that, among other things, such writings teach rulers and civil servants insights into the laws and respect for the liberty of man and citizen. In *On Merit*, then, Abbt seemed to acknowledge that rulers needed to be enlightened by learned writers.

In *On Death for the Fatherland*, Abbt had developed three further arguments in his defence of monarchy (in addition to demonstrating that
monarchy and republic are not opposed to each other per se). His second argument is that in monarchies as well as in republics there was but one single political virtue, and that was patriotism. Abbt observed that, while the division of society into distinct estates was a feature common to monarchies, when a nation was at war, such distinctions as between farmer, Bürger, soldier, and noble tended to disappear: Then, everything presented itself ‘under the formerly glorious name of a citizen.’

For his third argument, Abbt invoked experience and history. He asserted that history provided many examples of patriotism in monarchical states, but the problem was that this was hardly ever mentioned, and the explanation for this was that patriotism was less visible in monarchies than in republics: The person of the monarch and the ‘fatherland’ were closely connected; therefore, love of the fatherland tended to disappear behind love of the monarch. Moreover, there was no necessity for remembering the patriotic heroes of monarchies because their bravery was recompensed during their lifetimes, and there was, therefore, no need for them to be honoured in the future. This was different in republics because republics were poor, and therefore, they had to recompense their heroes after they died.

Abbt’s fourth argument examined the principle of honour. Montesquieu had argued that the driving motive for the subjects of a monarchy was honour. Abbt observed that honour was only relevant for nobles, while it was of no concern for ‘a great part of the nation.’ He recommended that monarchies should imitate the ‘manipulations found in republics’ by linking honour to patriotism: to motivate the whole nation, dying for the fatherland should be declared an honour to which every subject could aspire.

Paradoxically, one of Abbt’s greatest admirers was Zimmermann. As we have seen, Zimmermann invoked the republican ideal to demonstrate that the Swiss were about to lose their liberty. Among other things, he complained that the Swiss tended to misunderstand the love of moderation and love of equality that were required in the republic. In his view, they confounded moderation and mediocrity and thus tended to suppress enlightened persons whose thinking departed from the general mode. Zimmermann asserted that it was possible for a ‘spirit of slavery’ to develop in republics just as it did in monarchies when rulers became tyrants. These critical remarks help to explain why Zimmermann so easily agreed with Abbt’s position that sometimes liberty could be secured even better in a monarchy. With the second edition of his essay *On National Pride* in 1760, Zimmermann included a section on national pride in monarchies.
One aspect of Zimmermann’s account of monarchy has special importance here. As we have seen, Abbt claimed that liberty was the achievement of a well-ordered monarchy, while Zimmermann spoke of moderated monarchy. Yet, despite this difference in terminology, Zimmermann fully agreed with Abbt that the excellence of monarchical government was bound up with the qualities of the prince. He argued that in the republic liberty was guaranteed by rights and in the monarchy arbitrarily; furthermore, whereas republics were governed by laws instead of by men, in moderated monarchies ‘a worthy prince’ replaced the law. Although Zimmermann did not mention the Prussian king by name, Frederick II (the Great) certainly served as the model of the ideal ruler who was at once ‘king, philosopher, legislator, hero, and man.’ Like Abbt, Zimmermann asserted that moderated monarchy was a new form of government, unknown to the Ancients: because the fact that a certain ‘spirit of liberty’ can be found in monarchies is a ‘discovery’ of the modern age, they did not know, Zimmermann argued, that in monarchies subjects would one day become citizens. It is most likely that this remark was inspired by Montesquieu. However, while Montesquieu had argued that a certain type of monarchy was unknown to the Ancients, this was not the well-ordered or moderated monarchy of Abbt and Zimmermann. What Montesquieu had had in mind was the ‘Gothic’ government in which legislation was in the hands of the representatives of the nation. Abbt and Zimmermann replaced this Gothic monarchy by a new type, which was soon to be called enlightened monarchy.

**Enlightened Monarchy vs Republic: Klein and Kant**

Neither Abbt nor Zimmermann claimed explicitly that monarchy was the best form of government and thus superior to a republic. Their attempt to reconcile the ideas of unlimited monarchy with liberty, however, did introduce a new way of theorizing about monarchy. Two important contributions to the political debates of the 1780s further demonstrate that the achievements of Frederick II’s reign inspired new arguments in favour of monarchy. The first is an essay on freedom of thought and freedom of the press, written by the famous jurist Ernst Ferdinand Klein (1744–1810), and published in the *Berlinische Monatschrift* in 1784. The leading character of this essay is Frederick II.

Klein opened by reminding readers that ‘Frederick of Prussia’ had had an enormous influence on his contemporaries for almost half a century, both through his writings and by his example. Not wishing to assess
the particular achievements of Frederick’s long reign, Klein chose, instead, to quote at length from the king’s early writings. Klein’s aim was to demonstrate that the Prussian king – ‘who has since become the model for princes and the object of admiration for all of Europe’\textsuperscript{39} – had always been a defender of free thought and a free press. Then Klein launched into an appeal to those kings and princes who were still otherwise inclined in an attempt to convince them that liberty of thought does not endanger the state. He pointed to Prussia as an example where liberty of thought was at work on behalf of the state, where ‘freedom serves in place of the checks and balances prized by Montesquieu, which work as often against the useful as against the harmful expression of royal power.’ Klein insisted that the invincible power of the Prussian army, as well as the orderliness that prevailed in Prussia’s civil ranks, was based on subordination – ‘subordination is the soul of the whole Prussian state’ – and that this indispensable subordination is moderated, but not obstructed by liberty of thought and the press. ‘No superior will be hindered by it from doing what he wants, but only from wanting what he should not.’ Klein suggested that under these circumstances ‘fear of the judgment of the public can serve as a substitute for patriotism.’\textsuperscript{40}

Klein submitted that liberty of thought could serve to check and balance the government. In such cases, however, liberty of thought was to be restricted ‘to moderate judgments concerning measures carried out by the prince and his servants’; writings against the state that lure subjects away from their duty of obedience and stimulate civil unrest had to be censored. Klein concluded that this kind of liberty of the press is the distinguishing mark of a ‘wise government’: ‘Its gentle influence gives to unlimited monarchy all the blessings of political liberty, without exposing it to the destructive storms which so often darken the dawn of republican liberty and agitate its noon.’\textsuperscript{41}

Klein did not further explain what he took to be the meaning of political or republican liberty. The context of his argument suggests, however, that this was not Abbt’s civil liberty, understood as freedom from the law. Since Klein insisted that where freedom of thought was granted, public opinion would influence the government, it can be said that he thought of liberty as liberty to participate in the supreme power of the state. In his essay ‘On Freedom,’ Klein developed a theory to demonstrate his conviction that unlimited monarchy was to be seen as comparable in quality to the excellence of a republic.

A similar, though more sophisticated argument in defense of absolute monarchy was developed by Immanuel Kant in his famous essay, \textit{What Is
Enlightenment? which also appeared in 1784. Scholars have frequently commented on Kant’s praise of enlightened monarchy, and still do. Nevertheless, it has gone largely unnoticed that Kant drew on a comparison between monarchy and the free state. Thus, his essay culminates in what he himself called a ‘paradoxical’ conclusion. Pointing to the ‘shining example’ of Frederick II, Kant stressed that only the enlightened ruler, who has at hand a well-disciplined army to guarantee public security, may say what no free state would dare to: ‘Argue as much as you want and about whatever you want, but obey!’ This conclusion is ‘strange’ and ‘unexpected,’ because it contradicts – as Kant readily admitted – our common understanding of liberty. We would expect Freiheit des Geistes (freedom of thought) to be greater in contexts in which there was a greater degree of civil liberty. But, according to Kant, the opposite was the case: A greater degree of civil liberty sets ‘insuperable restrictions’ on freedom of thought and spirit, while a lesser degree of civil liberty creates room for intellectual freedom to expand to its fullest capacity.

In comments on the paradoxical conclusion of his essay, Kant neither explained what he understood by a free state nor did he point to a concrete example of one. He was quite explicit, however, in asserting that his praise of enlightened monarchy was not a principled one. Thus, he argued, a sovereign’s sanctioning free thinking was a process that, in turn, would have an effect on the character of the people, who would, if gradually, increasingly become able to act freely. In place of revolution, which ‘may perhaps bring about the fall of an autocratic despotism and of an avaricious or overbearing oppression,’ Kant advocated ‘true reform of a way of thinking.’ He expected that freedom of thought would eventually influence the principles of government, which then would treat man ‘in accord with his dignity.’ How he thought this was to be achieved, Kant had already explained in the body of his essay, in which he concentrated on religious issues. He assumed that where freedom of thought was granted, some truths would become so public and reliable that eventually a proposal might be brought before the throne. Kant argued, further, that a monarch could not permanently resist public proposals, for his lawgiving authority consisted ‘in his uniting the collective will of the people in his own.’ These explanations show that, for Kant, the goal of political reform consisted in what republicans had always cherished as the most excellent feature of a free state: the enduring protection of civil liberty by the law.

Kant’s later writings provide further confirmation of his political
views. In his article ‘On the Old Saying: That May be True in Theory But It Won’t Work in Practice,’ published in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in 1793, he did not reiterate his optimism about enlightened monarchy. This is no surprise, given the 1788 Edict of Religion and the subsequent censorship edict issued by Frederic William II’s new minister, J.C. Woellner. Both questioned the very principles for which Kant had praised the Prussian monarchy. Despite this drawback, in 1793 Kant upheld his argument that freedom of thought must be granted in every jurisdiction and described in some detail what he understood by a free state or a republic. He criticized Achenwall’s defence of a right to revolution: Citing the examples of Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Great Britain, he pointed out that the rebellion, by which these republics had achieved their present ‘happy’ constitution, must be considered to be an unlawful act, because the people introduced thereby a ‘state of nature,’ that is, a lawless state. Kant explained that the civil state was based not only on the liberty of each member of the society as a man and on his equality as subject, but it rested also on a man’s independence as citizen. In accordance with the republican tradition, Kant defined ‘citizen’ as a person who has a vote in the legislation by which a state is founded. The attribute ‘patriotic’ he reserved for governments in which the rights of the subjects were protected ‘by laws of their united will.’

As John C. Laursen has demonstrated in a more thoroughgoing analysis of Kant’s political writings, Kant’s theory of enlightened monarchy was part of a strategy of subversion: His defence of enlightened monarchy was not a principled one, but premised on the assumption that freedom of thought, which seemed to flourish during the reign of Frederick II, would eventually lead to the establishment of a republican constitution. As will be shown in the next section, this strategy was rather exceptional.

**Enlightened Monarchy vs Republic: Eberhard and Wyss**

Liberty was a confusing concept in the public political debates of the 1780s. Seeking further clarity on this topic, Johann August Eberhard (1739–1809), published his treatise *On Liberty of the Citizen and the Principles of the Forms of Government* in 1784. Eberhard presented a full-blown theory of enlightened monarchy designed to rule out the republic as the best form of government. In his preface, he acknowledged his engagement in ‘friendly controversy’ with ‘some young republicans’
about the value of various forms of government and their influence on liberty. He suggested that such controversies had grown out of a misunderstanding nourished by ambivalence regarding the meaning of liberty and that it was his intention to remove this ambivalence. Eberhard introduced a neat summary of the German debates that had been stimulated by Montesquieu’s classification of the forms of government. He explained that Montesquieu was the first to classify governments according to their principles and that this had provoked at least two kinds of criticism. First, those happily living under an unlimited monarchy saw Montesquieu as placing blame on the form of government of their fatherland, because he called it despotic and connected it to the principle of fear. Second, anyone at all not resident in a republic felt put to blame, because Montesquieu excluded virtue – ‘the noblest motive of human actions’ – from all forms of monarchical government. Their response, Eberhard observed, was to point out examples of ‘illustrious citizens’ of states with ‘unlimited governments’ – citizens whose political virtue, their defenders claimed, was equal to that of any of the republican heroes.

Eberhard made himself the mouthpiece of such critics. He denounced as ‘unfounded prejudice’ the idea that liberty was the exclusive reserve of republics or that a greater degree of liberty was to be found in democracies than in monarchies. He wondered whether in Germany this prejudice had led to ‘free state’ being a label given to the republics, or whether it was the other way round. He was, however, sure that ‘a certain kind of liberty’ had nothing to do with the distribution of power in a state. In many older as well as younger states that were commonly considered to be free, he observed, the citizens’ liberty to act was restricted, while in ‘the most unlimited’ monarchy citizens were perfectly free: ‘In Sparta no one was allowed to educate his children according to his own insights, in the republics of the Swiss federation liberty of thinking and of writing is smaller, in Great Britain burdens (of taxes) are heavier and punishments more severe than in many well-known unlimited monarchies; it is no exception that a citizen of these countries leaves his free fatherland to seek liberty in a country ruled by an unlimited monarch.’

Eberhard demonstrated his familiarity with the common republican position favouring self-government and the elimination of subjugation or slavery. Thus, he acknowledged that in the republican understanding, liberty of the citizen consisted in his participation in legislation. To mediate between the monarchist and republican positions, Eberhard
introduced a distinction between political and civil liberty: Civil liberty consisted of the right to act as one wished, insofar as such acts were not restricted by law, and this civil liberty did not depend on the form of government – in this sense, so-called free states were sometimes less free than monarchical ones. Eberhard’s political liberty consisted of participation in sovereignty; this kind of liberty did depend on the form of government. He noted that in democracies political liberty was greater than in aristocracies and that the highest degree of political liberty obtained in democracies where there was no distinction between the members of a state, where all heads of family were citizens and equal to each other. Eberhard submitted that no such perfect democracy existed in Europe because, as illustrated by the example of Geneva, many governments that had originally been democratic had since transmuted into aristocracies.  

Eberhard then attempted to explain the ‘curious phenomenon’ that the degree of civil liberty was often to be found inversely related to the degree of political liberty. As the necessity arose for a monarchical government to convince its subjects that it really deserved legislative power, it would grant civil liberty to a maximum degree, or at least to a higher degree, than to be found in a republic. Under a republican government, restriction of civil liberty would more easily be accepted, because such restriction was balanced by citizens’ awareness of their independence. This, asserted Eberhard, was why the ‘most enlightened monarchies,’ for which Prussia provided the example, could be so proud of their legislation and civil administration, which were superior to what could be found in many republics.  

Having demonstrated that in an unlimited monarchy civil liberty tended to be greater than in republics, Eberhard proceeded to his argument that patriotism was the principle of every type of good government, whether monarchy or a republic. First, he reminded his readers that some Bürger of a republic had no part in sovereignty and were thus not citizens (Staatsbürger). They were, therefore, in the same position as Bürger in a monarchy – not self-governed, but rather subject to laws made by others. On what grounds, Eberhard wondered, would we conclude that the Bürger of a monarchy were motivated by honour, while those of a republic were motivated by virtue? If patriotism depended at all on the form of government, we must conclude that it was reserved for citizens (Staatsbürger). Second, Eberhard turned to the concept of honour. He argued, against Montesquieu, that honour presupposed virtuous convictions. Eberhard considered honour to be ‘the reflection of
the assessment of value and merit': Meritorious acts were honoured, because they were motivated by virtue. Eberhard submitted the explanation that monarchies could not survive without virtue, and therefore orders and other distinctions of honour had to be bestowed on deserving patriots – adding that the giver of awards for honour himself had to be patriotic, since otherwise it could well happen that lusts, waste, and tyranny were rewarded.57

Eberhard’s third argument is in line with Abbt: It was possible that Montesquieu’s claim that honour, as opposed to virtue, was the principle of monarchy could be taken to mean that in a flourishing monarchy virtue was supported by honour. In this perspective, the patriotic monarch would distribute honours as a method of promoting undertakings that were of public utility and to make sacrifices easier to bear. If this were so, Eberhard deduced, then monarchies used the same means as republics did. As an example he mentioned the symbols of honour such as triumphal parades, public memorials, and statues that were pervasive in the ancient republics.

On the basis of his three arguments, Eberhard concluded that Montesquieu’s theory of governments and their principles must be explained in the following way: To flourish, the ‘leading part’ in every government had to possess virtue, while the subjects were incited to virtuous deeds by honours that were distributed by the rulers. In monarchies only the few needed to be virtuous, but in republics all those participating in the sovereign power had to be virtuous. Eberhard further suggested that in a monarchy even mere subjects would become virtuous over time, for as their trust in the wisdom, justice, and virtue of the rulers grew, their national pride would awaken.58

Eberhard did admit, however, that virtue could only be expected to spread in this way if rulers were, in fact, wise and virtuous. If, instead, rulers were ignorant, incapable, stupid, and corrupt, their subjects necessarily had to be kept subjugated by fear. Here Eberhard proposed another correction to Montesquieu’s theory of government. In his view, despotism – which is based on fear – should not be taken as a distinct form of government. It was instead the corruption of government, whatever its form. Accordingly, the despot, whether the poly-headed one of a democracy or the single-headed one of a monarchy, was not directed by considerations of the common weal, but rather by ignorance and passion. Eberhard thus designed a model of a monarchy that was at the same time unlimited and enlightened. This monarchy was ruled by an enlightened monarch, one who ensured that his civil servants were able
and honest, which was accomplished through the establishment of institutions for the education of civil servants. The effect of education would be further supported by the hierarchy of offices, since only those who proved themselves first in lower offices would be permitted to assume the highest offices of the state. Thus, the holder of supreme power would do everything possible to act on the basis of knowledge and reason; his reason would capture the weal of the state, and his will could not depart from reason. This is how, Eberhard concluded, the virtue and wisdom of the monarch would compensate for the lack of political liberty: ‘The will of all enlightened and virtuous Bürger becomes his own, and his will becomes the will of all enlightened and virtuous Bürger.’

Anyone familiar with the republican tradition of political thought may well be astonished by the naiveté of Eberhard’s arguments. Republicans have always insisted that the wisdom and virtue of the monarch cannot be trusted as long as his will is not subject to law. Klein invoked public opinion as a counterbalance to the unlimited will of the monarch, whereas Eberhard appealed simply to the excellence of the ruler and his civil servants. Eberhard’s laudatory views on the regime of Frederick II did not stand uncontested. The following year (1785) a straightforward rejection of Eberhard’s theory of enlightened monarchy by David Wyss appeared in Schweizer Museum. Wyss’s work confirms that from the 1760s, in face of the Prussian monarchy’s recent expansion of power, Switzerland was one of the strongholds of republican thinking in German public debates about government. Wyss, too, found Montesquieu’s classification to need clarification, but he challenged Eberhard’s thesis that monarchies granted civil liberty to a greater extent than democracies did. Wyss agreed with Montesquieu concerning the principle that civil liberty increased as the form of government approached democracy, and diminished as it approached monarchy. This was the principle, as Wyss proceeded to explain, that had motivated Montesquieu to attribute virtue as a principle only to the republican form of government.

In his essay ‘Uber bürgerlich und politische Freyheit,’ Wyss offered three arguments for his case. The first was based on experience and aimed at demonstrating that republics allow a higher degree of civil liberty than monarchies do. Wyss began with a consideration of involuntary war service, deploring that in France, Austria, and Prussia, and indeed, in all monarchies, many thousands of men were forced to obey the stick of tyrannical sergeants. That this burden did not rest on the higher estates, but mostly on the lowest classes did not make it excusable, he submitted,
for all reasonable creatures of God had the same right to liberty, and the
destiny of hundreds of thousands could not be balanced against the
weal of hundreds. While the great empires were maintaining huge
standing armies and thereby exhausting their realms, permanent invol-
untary war service had been unknown to the ancient republics of
Greece and Rome, and it was as yet unknown in England, Holland, and
the United States of America. On the question of private wealth, Wyss
pointed to the difference between monarchies, in which the prince
could pillage his subjects according to his arbitrary will, and republics,
in which the people or their representatives made the decisions on taxa-
tion. As he observed, the peasantry and middle classes suffered under a
terrible burden of high taxes in all the kingdoms of Europe. It would
not help, he said, to object that in England and Holland taxes were
higher than in France or Germany, for taxes needed to be seen in pro-
portion to the wealth and resources of the population. Since England
and Holland excelled with regard to the riches of their governments
and the wealth of their lower estates, he continued, taxes on private per-
sons were comparatively lower there than in monarchies.63

Next, Wyss took up the issue of sumptuary laws, which were often
enacted in republics, although they restricted civil liberty. He noted that
these kinds of laws could also be found in monarchies. Moreover, he
found sumptuary laws to be justifiable as the best means of upholding
the equality of the estates and of preventing the corruption of manners
and morals. Turning to censorship or, more precisely, freedom from
censorship (Censurfreiheit), Wyss readily admitted that, in Berlin, free-
dom of thought and the press was greater than that in any other capital of
Europe. He considered this to be but a temporary advantage, however,
dependent on the rule of Frederick II – stressing that in a monarchy, lib-
erty was always provisional. The night of the Inquisition was still upon
Spain and Portugal, he added, and in many other monarchies, dark
dungeons still remained. Wyss’s final topic was the administration of jus-
tice. He was frank in making the observation that Prussia in his time
could boast the most enviable judicature, noting, however, that this had
nothing to do with monarchy as the form of government. In general,
subjects of monarchies were afflicted with ‘expensive eternal legal pro-
ceedings’ and with ‘Gothic criminal formulas,’ while in republics, laws
and lawsuits were straightforward.64

Against Eberhard’s argument that liberty depended on the enlighten-
ment of the prince and his civil servants, Wyss insisted that ‘the highly
praised enlightenment’ of princes had little effect on liberty. For princes
would always aim at enriching themselves and only grant the necessities of life to their subjects. Moreover, they pushed through reforms very quickly, without taking care to change the minds of their peoples. Wyss found it to be an advantage that the process of deliberation and decision-making was rather slow in republics, for this allowed for the ‘complete re-melting’ of the national way of thinking. Where enlightenment was pushed through without there having been a change in the minds of the people, reforms had to be secured by ‘despotic edicts,’ as was the case with the prohibition of emigration, for example.65

Wyss’s second argument in favour of the republic was a principled one. Thus, he claimed that, even if one were to suppose that civil liberty in a monarchy was greater than in a republic at some particular time, monarchy could not overtake the republic as the best form of government because such civil liberty was but a ‘house built on sand,’ as long as it was not based on political liberty. As Eberhard was ready to admit, the security of person and property depended on the insights and the good will of the rulers. It was thus necessary, Wyss explained, to examine what form of government was most resistant to weak and despotic rulers. Here Wyss relied on the old republican maxim that in monarchies, power and authority would always be abused. If nature endowed a prince with a ‘good heart’ and ‘right reason,’ education would deaden his love of men and darken his knowledge of the true, the good, and the honest. For princely education was always in the hands of flatterers. Even if a prince were to be honest on assuming the throne, he would soon be corrupted by the enjoyment of unlimited rule.66

In contrast to monarchies, submitted Wyss, republics – whether aristocracies or democracies – were less exposed to the dangers of bad government. Because the authority of the magistrates depended on the trust and contentment of the people, their decisions would be directed by the weal of the majority. Should it happen that some magistrates became slaves of their ambition and their passions, they would be checked by the better part of the magistracy. Protection of person and property could, however, best be guaranteed by fundamental laws that could not be abolished without the consent of all citizens. Since the same fundamental laws established the citizen’s share in sovereignty, they also provided the basis of political liberty. Wyss explained that this was completely different in monarchies, where the enactment of fundamental laws was restricted to those who regulated succession to the throne, and all remaining laws depended on the arbitrary will of the prince.67
Wyss developed a third argument in support of Montesquieu’s position that monarchy relied on the principle of honour. To demonstrate that the goal of monarchical government was the preservation of power and honour, Wyss drew attention to the European politics of war at the time. Wars were not waged for the sake of the happiness or wealth of the people, but to satisfy the unlimited ambition of princes: ‘Even the heroic soul of Frederick was not animated by the wish to promote the weal of his Prussians when he raped Silesia, but by the exciting thought that the house of Brandenburg could be raised to the colossal greatness of Austria.’ As a result, Prussia became a power of the first rank. Wyss contended that the ambition of princes and, consequently, wars, were the necessary result of the monarchical form of government. Furthermore, princely ambition was also visible in times of peace. Wyss observed that, in monarchies, the revenues of the state were considered to be the private property of the prince, who spent them to sustain his favourites and mistresses. Miserable statecraft corresponded with this administration, he continued, using orders and ‘salaries of grace’ as a means of motivation. Those surrounding the prince strove after honour and splendor, and as a result, the courts were filled with the ignorant. In this way, Wyss put the courtier in stark contrast to the patriot.68

In his demonstration that patriotism was to be reserved for republics, Wyss started from the claim that republics were directed by the maxim that the weal of the people must be the supreme law. This maxim, he posited, was rooted in each citizen’s interest in public affairs, an interest that included the obligation to oppose the ambitious designs of other citizens. This, said Wyss, explained why citizens would always oppose standing armies. He did admit that the lack of a disciplined army would put the republic at risk if surrounded by ambitious neighbours, but pointing to the example of the United States, he submitted that patriotism would always triumph over tactics – because patriots fought for their own liberty, and this was why republics seldom went to war. Wyss suggested that, in this regard, Rome was to be seen as an exception, since many republics, the Swiss among them, had voluntarily renounced expansion. All this was proof to Wyss that the republican form of government produced limitation and moderation. Republics were sustained by patriotism, and, he claimed, therefore they were in a happier condition than were monarchies. This happy condition was marked by the growth of population and wealth, as well as by enlightenment, and the promotion of culture among the lower estates, proper education, and the arts and sciences.69 Wyss did not, as far as I can determine,
introduce any new or original argument in promoting the republic as the best form of government. His reply to Eberhard is worthy of attention here because it testifies to the continuing republican resistance to confounding Frederick the Great’s widely admired rule with the conclusion that monarchy is the best form of government. Thus, Wyss correctly foresaw that the advantages brought about by an enlightened and benevolent ruler would vanish with their author, just as the patriotism that his subjects had devoted to him evaporated.

**Conclusion**

As Fabienne Molin has demonstrated, Eberhard was not much impressed by Wyss’s arguments. Eberhard developed his theory of unlimited monarchy further in reaction to the French Revolution, and turned his preference from ‘unlimited’ to well-ordered monarchy. He presented the latter as a concept in three letters written to a friend in Switzerland in 1798. Eberhard alluded several times to the earlier controversy, and it is therefore safe to conclude that these letters were addressed to Wyss. Yet, as Molin has noted, Eberhard kept to the model of enlightened monarchy, although he defended it with some refined arguments. At the time of the Helvetic Revolution (1798), Eberhard obviously thought it timely to remind his Swiss friend of the advantages of monarchical government. His first letter opened with the observation that the firm tie that had held the Swiss federation together (faith, honesty, patriotism) was about to loosen. He recommended a ‘well-ordered monarchy’ as the best, easiest, and most secure means of guaranteeing the ends of civil society.

Eberhard’s 1798 letters indicate that the theory of enlightened monarchy had not become obsolete with the French Revolution. What had become obsolete, however, was the ancient type of virtuous republic, of which the Swiss republics had been the last remaining stronghold. Paradoxically, the distinction between what Eberhard called civil and political liberty played a crucial role in the transition from classical to modern republicanism. This distinction can easily be paralleled with Benjamin Constant’s (1767–1830) distinction between the ‘liberty of the ancients’ and the ‘liberty of the moderns,’ which Constant directed against Rousseau’s concept of popular sovereignty. As Constant pointed out in 1819, modern liberty needed to be secured by individual rights in order to prevent the abuse of sovereign power. For Constant this did not
mean, however, that ancient liberty could be replaced by the virtue and wisdom of an enlightened monarch. He proposed, instead, that direct political participation should be replaced by representation and completed by a system of checks and balances.73 A modern republican constitution that rested on the sovereignty of the people, representation, and division of the supreme power did not preclude monarchical government: This was what Montesquieu had explained in *The Spirit of the Laws*, using the example of the English monarchy.

This was not, however, what Prussian authors had had in mind. As we have seen, in the Swiss-German debates on the best form of government, England was frequently numbered among the republics (and not the monarchies), whereby no distinction was made between republics of the ancient and the modern type. The dividing line drawn here was between republican and monarchical forms of government. In this chapter I have analysed but one strategy of argumentation designed to justify unlimited monarchy as the best form of government. An alternative strategy was developed by the Prussian secretary of state, Ewald Friedrich von Hertzberg (1725–1795), to demonstrate the superiority of the Prussian monarchy and legitimize its pretension to power.74 Unlike the writers that I have considered in detail in this essay, Hertzberg did not rely on liberty of thought or civil liberty in defending ‘free and moderated monarchy’ as the best form of government.75 Instead, he promoted a kind of monarchy that was well known throughout the centuries and that was peculiar to the German nations (*nations germaniques*). As Tacitus had demonstrated, argued Hertzberg, the German nations were ruled by kings, dukes, or princes, who exercised all civil and military power, ‘but with the advice and the assistance of the nobles and the chiefs of every nation.’ This was why Tacitus wrote of ‘the liberty of the Germans.’ To Hertzberg, the Prussian monarchy best embodied this form of government, because the king admitted ‘intermediary corps’ or ‘provincial estates or orders’ (*Landstände*).76 It seems that Hertzberg was referring here to the type of monarchy that Montesquieu called Gothic. Hertzberg declared it to be the best form of government, maintaining that it was superior to a republic (such as in America), as well as to a ‘republican monarchy’ (such as the English monarchy).77 It is doubtful, however, whether Hertzberg’s concept of ‘free and moderated monarchy’ was faithful to Montesquieu’s Gothic government.78 For Hertzberg insisted that legislative and executive power were to remain united ‘in the only person of the sovereign.’ For him, the competence
of the *Landstände* was to be limited to advising the ruler. Should provincial estates participate in the legislation, Hertzberg warned, disastrous unrest would result, as was well known to be the case in republics.79

Both strategies of argumentation for the monarchy developed on the basis of Montesquieu’s classification of governments seem exceptional to me, because both rest on the assumption that liberty is best secured by unlimited government. For that reason, the form of government that contemporaries saw embodied in Frederick II’s Prussia certainly deserves to be called enlightened absolutism.

**Notes**


3 Birtsch, ‘Aufgeklärter Absolutismus.’

4 The contributions to Reinalter and Klueting, *Der aufgeklärte Absolutismus*, are representative in this respect.


10 Ibid., 741–53.

11 See Hans Erich Bödeker and Ulrich Herrmann, eds., *Aufklärung als Poli-


14 Abbt, ‘Vom Tode für das Vaterland,’ 597.


16 Ibid., Book 3.


18 On Swiss political thought in the eighteenth century, see Michael Böhler et

19 Johann Georg Zimmermann, *Vom Nationalstolze* (Zurich 1758). Zimmermann’s critique was primarily directed against the Bernese aristocracy. He originated from the village of Brugg in Aargau, which at that time was a subject territory of the Republic of Berne. Zimmermann had no chance to participate in the government of the republic. On his ambiguous attitude towards the Swiss republics, see Simone Zurbuchen, ‘Berliner ‘Exil’ und Schweizer ‘Heimat’: Johann Georg Zimmermanns Reflexionen über die Rolle des Schweizer Gelehrten,’ in Martin Fontius et al., eds., *Schweizer im Berlin des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin 1996), 57–68.


23 Abbt, ‘Vom Verdienste,’ 309ff. Abbt speaks of *Menschenfreiheit* (liberty of man) and *Bürgerfreiheit* (civil liberty). *Bürger* was a highly ambiguous term at this time. It could be used either to describe what Rousseau called the *bourgeois* or the citizen who has a share in the sovereign power (*citoyen*). The latter was sometimes also called *Staatsbürger*. In this essay I translate *Bürger* to mean citizen, unless it is clearly distinguished from *Staatsbürger*, in which case I translate *Staatsbürger* as citizen and use the German term *Bürger* in the sense of *bourgeois*.

24 Abbt, ‘Vom Verdienste,’ 311.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 262ff.

27 Abbt, ‘Vom Tode für das Vaterland,’ 600.

28 Ibid., 602ff.

29 Ibid., 634ff.

Origins of Prussian Monarchism

31 Ibid., 181.
32 In the following I refer to the 4th ed., Zurich 1768.
33 Zimmermann, Vom Nationalstolze (4th ed.), 277.
36 On Montesquieu’s notion of ‘Gothic’ government, see Michael A. Mosher, ‘Monarchy’s Paradox: Honour in the Face of Sovereign Power,’ in Carrithers et al., Montesquieu’s Science, 163–9.
39 Klein, ‘On Freedom of Thought,’ 90.
40 Ibid., 92.
41 Ibid., 93.
Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1996), 58–64.

43 Ibid., 63.
44 Ibid., 59.


47 In this sense the edicts certainly were a loss to the Enlightenment. For a differentiated account of Woellner and his policy, see Michael J. Sauter’s contribution to this volume.

48 Kant, ‘Über den Gemeinspruch,’ 305.
49 Ibid., 301.
50 Ibid., 291ff.


52 Johann August Eberhard, ‘Über die Freyheit des Bürgers und die Principien der Regierungsformen,’ in Vermischte Schriften, Part 1 (Halle 1784), 4–28. Eberhard was appointed professor of philosophy at the University of Halle in 1778. He was the main representative of the so-called Leibniz-Wolffian philosophy in the late Enlightenment and is famous for his opposition to Kant’s philosophy. He founded two journals directed at rejecting Kant’s philosophy, Philosophisches Magazin (1788–1792) and Philosophisches Archiv (1792–1795). See Gerda Hassler, Johann August Eberhard (1739–1809): ein streitbarer Geist an den Grenzen der Aufklärung (Halle 2000).

53 Eberhard, ‘Über die Freyheit des Bürgers,’ 4ff.
54 Ibid., 6ff.
55 Ibid., 7–10.
56 Ibid., 11.
57 Ibid., 12–16.
58 Ibid., 16–20.
59 Ibid., 20–4.

assume that the author is David Wyss the younger, i.e., the son of David Wyss (1719–1797), who played a major role in the defence of the Ancien Régime against the revolutionaries of Stäfa. As Böning pointed out, the younger Wyss also defended the old republican order. In 1796 he published a Political Manual for Young People in the City and Country of Zurich. See Holger Böning, Der Traum von Gleichheit und Freiheit: Helvetische Revolution und Republik (1798–1803) – Die Schweiz auf dem Weg zur bürgerlichen Demokratie (Zurich 1998), 92. On Wyss’s Manual, see also Christoph Guggenbühl, Zensur und Pressefreiheit: Kommunikationskontrolle in Zürich an der Wende zum 19. Jahrhundert (Zurich 1996), 72–3.


62 Wyss, ‘Über bürgerliche und politische Freyheit,’ 1017ff.
63 Ibid., 1019–21.
64 Ibid., 1021ff.
65 Ibid., 1022–4.
66 Ibid., 1024–6.
67 Ibid., 1026ff.
68 Ibid., 1027–32.
69 Ibid., 1033–7.

72 Ibid., 397ff.


74 On Hertzberg’s account of the Prussian monarchy, see the excellent study by Claudia Schröder, “Siècle de Frédéric II” und “Zeitalter der Aufklärung,” in Epochenbegriffe im geschichtlichen Selbstverständnis der Aufklärung (Berlin 2002), 142–66.


76 Ibid., 149–50.

77 Schröder, ‘Siècle de Frédéric II,’ 156.

78 On Montesquieu’s notion of ‘Gothic’ government, see Mosher, ‘Monarchy’s Paradox,’ 165–9.

In 1774 a French translation of Philostratus’s *Life of Apollonius of Tyane*, written in AD 217, together with a translation of Charles Blount’s notes to his English translation of 1680, was published by Jean de Castillon, a pious Calvinist mathematician and member of the Prussian Academy. Apollonius was a first-century Christlike Pythagorean religious prophet whose life was full of miracles. Anti-Christians like Blount revelled in the story because it raised so obviously the question of how one was supposed to tell who was the real Saviour and who an impostor. But Castillon was also the author of *Observations on the System of Nature* (1771) which refuted Holbach’s atheistic work of that title on behalf of Christianity, and other evidence suggests that he was genuinely religious. Why, then, did Castillon translate such an anti-Christian text as Blount’s Philostratus?

The answer is going to bring out the importance of what has been called the religious, conservative, or Christian Enlightenment. It is a case study in one set of tactics and strategies available to intellectuals in opposition to the policies of the Prussian monarchy when it was at the height of its prestige and power. It is also a study of the limits of state power and political authority even in such circumstances. It works against many of the stereotypes of ‘The Enlightenment Project’ that have gained public acceptance in recent decades, and may change some readers’ views of Prussian cultural politics in the eighteenth century.

We are fortunate to have some clear evidence about Castillon’s motivations. The Italian traveller Carlo Antonio Pilati reported in his *Voyages in Different Parts of Europe in 1774, 1775, and 1776* (1777) that
This M. Castillon is a mathematician who greatly loves theology, against the ordinary custom of mathematicians who are attached only to demonstrations; I think the king wanted to mortify him for the theological books he has written by ordering him to translate into French the life of Apollonius of Thyane written by Philostratus, of which there is an English translation, at least of the first two books, to which the translator has adjoined notes very likely to clash with all species of theology; the king wanted M. Castillon to begin his French translation of that translation without omitting the notes.¹

Who was this king, and why did he want to mortify the pious? It was Frederick II of Prussia, also known as Frederick the Great. Pilati noted that the king ‘never goes to church. He lets [religious writers] do and write whatever they want, but he mocks what they are and what they write. His theology is that of reason; and his canon law is in his arsenal.’² So what we see here is princely unbelief, a monarch actively promoting the cause of irreligion and a religious mathematician being forced to go along with this project.

What can we make of the two sides? By Voltairean stereotypes, ‘Ecrasez l’infâme!’ and the subversion of Christian cultural domination is practically the definition of Enlightenment. We have, therefore, an ‘Enlightened’ monarch. But other stereotypes would have it that anyone who was committed to the philosophy of Descartes, Newton, and Locke and was involved in mathematics and the natural sciences as a member of numerous scientific academies was also entitled to membership in the Enlightenment. Thus, Castillon, too, could claim to be Enlightened. What we have here is evidently a fight within the Enlightenment. We have a representative of what is called the ‘Radical Enlightenment’³ at loggerheads with a representative of the ‘Religious Enlightenment,’ ‘Christian Enlightenment,’ or ‘Protestant Enlightenment.’⁴ The radical was the king, and he held some of the most prestigious cards: royal authority and a powerful army. The Christian was the underdog, the king’s employee and servant. We shall see who ‘won.’

Why was a mathematician being asked to translate a Greek text? The short answer is that Castillon was a polymath. We can begin to unpack this answer by a review of his biography. Born in 1709 in Florence as Giovanni Francesco Mauro Melchiorre Salvemini, he was irreligious as a youth.⁵ He fled the Inquisition to Switzerland in 1736 and took the name Castiglione (in Italian; Castilloneus in Latin and Castillon in French). Making a living as a translator and teacher of rhetoric, human-
ities, and mathematics, he abandoned his irreligion and became a Calvinist in 1744.

Castillon’s Christianity was always Enlightened, consistent with commitments to Descartes, Locke, and Newton. In the 1740s he began to send mathematical papers to the Royal Society in London and edited an edition of Newton’s shorter works. He became a corresponding member of the Royal Society in 1745, and in 1748 he published a manuscript by Euler on infinitesimals. In 1751 he was named professor of mathematics, experimental physics, and astronomy at Utrecht and he soon became a corresponding member of several other academies of science. In 1756 he answered Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Inequality of Men* with a defence of progress and modern civility; it was dedicated to Maupertuis, president of the Prussian Academy, and complete with quotations from Frederick II’s *Anti-Machiavel*. In the following years he brought out more scientific works including a Latin edition of and commentary on Newton’s *Universal Arithmetic* (1761) and a French version of Locke’s *Elements of Natural Philosophy*.

In 1763 Frederick II invited Castillon to Berlin as professor of mathematics at the Artillery School, and he was named an ordinary member of the Mathematics Class of the Prussian Academy that same year. But he never neglected his humanities side. From 1772 to 1775 Castillon co-edited the *Journal littéraire* in Berlin, and his many translations up to this point from the Latin, Italian, or English into French demonstrate that he was able to work in many languages. Frederick must have known he had Greek, too.

Just before the volume in question, Frederick and Castillon had sparred on religious matters. Frederick had answered d’Holbach’s *System of Nature* with an *Examen critique du ‘Système de la nature’.* As Edoardo Tortarolo puts it, Castillon’s book of 1771, mentioned above, ‘amply answered the atheism of d’Holbach, in subtle refutation of the brief and wholly political, even inflammatory, answer of Frederick ... Castillon’s work reintroduced the principles of up-to-date Protestant theology from Clarke to Bonnet, his themes running from the existence of God ... to the notion of virtue as philanthropy and dedication to the common good,’ which he identified with Christianity. It is not surprising that Frederick wanted to pique his Academician after this.

And what was the text Frederick wanted to see in French? Charles Blount is known as one of the first English libertines and Deists. His text, *The Two First Books, of Philostratus* of 1680 came just after his *Anima Mundi; or, An Historical Narration of the Opinions of the Ancients Concerning*
Man’s Soul after This Life (1679) and A Just Vindication of Learning (1679; under the pseudonym Philopatris). In translating Philostratus, he was following up on Gabriel Naudé, who had tried to rehabilitate Apollonius in his Apology for Great Men Accused of Magic of 1625.9 Lord Herbert of Cherbury took an interest in Apollonius; after Blount the great church historian Tillemont wrote on him;10 he was the subject of a novel by Christoph Martin Wieland titled Agathodämon (1799); and even Napoleon wrote something on him as a young lieutenant of artillery.11 Charles Leslie wrote against Blount in A Short and Easy Method with Deists of 1704.

The text of Philostratus inspired such controversy that Aldus Minutiussus, when he brought out the first modern Greek edition in 1501 and a Latin translation in 1504, mentioned in the preface how worthless he thought it was (nihil unquam memini me legere deterius).12 But Philostratus may not have had any of the anti-Christian intentions that later writers found in his work. He wrote the biography of Apollonius at the request of the Empress Julia Domna, wife of Septimius Severus, in whose household he lived.13 She may have simply been interested in him as a respected holy man from her homeland of Syria. A certain Hierocles, under the Emperor Diocletian, wrote a biography of Apollonius with anti-Christian intent, and Eusebius wrote a polemic against him.14 This may be what inspired Blount to bring out the anti-Christian potential in Philostratus’s work.

We know that Frederick II knew something about Philostratus because he had already reprinted part of Pierre Bayle’s article on Apollonius of Tyane in his edition of extracts from Bayle’s Dictionary in 1765.15 At his death Frederick’s library included a copy of a 1611 French translation of Philostratus.16 He also might have noticed Voltaire’s short discussion of Apollonius in the introduction to the Essai sur le Moeurs of 1769, where Apollonius is described as a Pythagorean philosopher who could work miracles, but did so modestly and with no ‘enthusiasm,’ that key Enlightenment term for what has been called ‘the Antiself of Enlightenment.’17

At this point, we see that Frederick ordered Castillon to do something that he was not likely to want to do. But Frederick was his employer, an absolute monarch, and head of a powerful army. What were Castillon’s weapons in this duel of wits? They were formidable scholarly skills. He did not opt for open insubordination or exile. Instead, he adopted all manner of scholarly tools to the defence of Christianity and the subversion of the text that he had been ordered to
translate. We may count him in one branch of the tradition of intellectuals 'Talking to Tyrants.'

Castillon’s translation came out in four volumes, duodecimo, published by George Decker, the Royal Printer. The length (a total of 2,028 pages) and price would no doubt discourage many buyers and readers, and the implicit royal imprimatur would put off any suspicion that this was a piece of exciting clandestina. The author signalled his disapproval of the project by declining any credit: his name does not appear in the work.

Rather surprisingly, for a Protestant author writing in eighteenth-century Berlin, the book is dedicated to Clement XIV. Several pages of the dedication are addressed to the Pope, calling on him to enlighten us about the devil’s work and praising him for abolishing the Jesuits. It is signed ‘Philalethes.’

The translator’s note begins the process of discrediting Blount. Blount worked from a Latin translation, not the original Greek (viii), so scholars will already begin to suspect his accuracy. Our translator has corrected the translation from Olearius’s better version (xiii). Blount was also not original: he got most of his notes from Lord Herbert of Cherbury, ‘fameux Déiste’ (ix). Another little dig is that Castillon has cut Blount’s prolixity; but without disfiguring it, remaining faithful to the original (xiii). Furthermore, he points out that Blount has quoted Montaigne without citation, so the translator has restored Montaigne’s French original (xv).

Castillon added hundreds of notes, most of them criticizing and correcting Blount. The cumulative effect that he surely sought to engender was complete distrust in Blount’s scholarship and thus in his authority. The notes are of several types. Dozens point out simple mistakes, such as referring to the Chersonese instead of the Pelopponese (1.33), Tarsia instead of Tarsius (1.90), or citing book IV instead of book III of Strabo (1.86). Many of these are so nit-picky that a reader can lose patience, and of course, that may have been part of Castillon’s purpose: if he can get you to put the book down, he has won the game against Frederick.

Castillon tracks down Blount’s every reference, and if he cannot find something Blount claims to have found in a text, he makes that point (1.35, 61, 70–1, 96, 99, 107, 141, 145, etc.). He shows where Blount embellishes his sources (1.86, 98, 164, 178, etc.). He convict Blount of citation out of context by setting a short citation from Montaigne in a larger part of the paragraph from which it is taken (1.209).
If Blount’s scholarship is good, then Castillon points out that his source is erroneous or contradictory (e.g., Strabo at 1.87). If Blount relies on one ancient author for information about another, Castillon will catch him: Seneca led him into an error about Pliny (1.31) and Polidore Virgil led him into another about Aristotle (1.56). Sometimes Blount relies on bad translations by other modern authors like Rinuccini or Morel (1.266). Castillon will sometimes supply the original where he translates the English, demonstrating how far the English was from the original (e.g., 1.113).

Another kind of criticism focuses on Blount’s interpretations. Castillon critiques his summaries of texts or ideas: ‘Charles Blount represents very poorly the reasoning of Tertullian’ (1.21). Blount misunderstands Lactantius (1.114), misinterprets St Paul (1.121), or does not explain well the sentiments of Alcinous (2.358). He misses the point that something he quotes from Cardanus was expressed in quotation marks and should be taken as irony (1.298).

Castillon brings out Blount’s reliance on the notorious big names of the tradition of radical anti-religion. Hobbes ‘did not say what Blount makes him say here,’ although ‘perhaps he thought like Blount’ (1.178). In book II, Castillon points out that pp. 123–30 are a paraphrase of the second chapter of Spinoza’s *Traité ethico-politique* (2.130). Blount copies lots of things from Machiavelli, Montaigne, and Vanini without attribution (2.35, 38, 41, 43, 45).

Often, Castillon distances himself by remarking that he is translating Blount faithfully, even though Blount is very different from his original (Pliny) (1.204). Elsewhere, ‘I do not pretend to guarantee the justice of these calculations. I limit myself to copying faithfully my original’ (3.481).

Further criticisms of Blount range widely. In a note to Blount’s mention of Spanish pride and Italian perfidy Castillon adds: ‘One sees well that the author has never travelled’ (1.45–6). When Blount says that ‘the French language is misleading, because one writes it in one way and pronounces it in another,’ our author comments: ‘observe that it is an Englishman who makes this reproach’ (1.430). Elsewhere, Blount’s reasoning is poor (1.116).

Castillon’s notes also undermine Philostratus. He suggests that Philostratus has been free with his sources by pointing out that a Greek word Philostratus uses to describe his use of a source means both ‘copy’ and ‘correct’ (1.40). Philostratus’s chief source is Damis, and Castillon reports at one place that ‘here Olearius remarks very appropriately that
these fables are apparently explanations that the imbecile Damis gave of the enigma of his master’ (4.24).

Castillon also attacks Apollonius, although less frequently. In chapter 32 of Philostratus, where Apollonius is happy that a certain king speaks Greek, Castillon asks why he cares, if he knows all languages? (2.275; also 4.51) When he translates that ‘Apollonius was amazed’ when he heard something, he adds a sarcastic note: ‘Even though he knew the thoughts of men’ (4.28). Later, ‘this translation is exact; it’s not my fault if Apollonius said a puerility’ (4.236).

Volume 3 ends with ‘Remarques du traducteur’ (3.457–79). The translator observes that he has now finished with the ‘scholarly [savant] and prolix Commentary of Charles Blount’ (3.457). ‘To have given it without correction would have been to be exposed to the just indignation of scholars [savants], and to the danger of inducing error in those who read for instruction’ (3.457). One lesson is that ‘the mistakes that I have mentioned in the citations from this Commentator ought to warn the reader that he ought not have confidence in those where I have said nothing’ (3.458). He repeats the point that Blount copies Montaigne without citing him (3.459) and draws attention to some of Blount’s mistakes (3.466, 474–5). But other than that, he just translates many passages, mostly from Ammianus Marcelinus, which provide context for the translation. It is not what you would want to call a personal statement of the translator.

Volume 4 contains a translation of the Greek of volumes 3–8 of Philostratus’s work, which were not translated by Blount. There are far fewer notes here, because Castillon does not need to discredit Blount any more. This volume also finishes with a ‘Conclusion du traducteur’ (4.603–10), which is also relatively non-committal. It begins with a statement that ‘it is up to the reader to judge what faith he will have in Philostratus, and what opinion he shall form about Apollonius’ (4.603). Several pages cite opposing opinions about whether Apollonius was a god, an extraordinary man, something in between, or a magician. The last of these, of course, raises a potentially damning accusation, which Castillon may have wanted to leave in the minds of his readers. In the last paragraph he apologizes for any infidelities in the translation.

Most of Castillon’s notes and comments are passed off as impersonal scholarship. As we have already seen, a personal voice peeks through occasionally. Something of a social conscience appears in a note to the story in which Apollonius makes hoarding corn-sellers sell in order to avoid a famine: Castillon remarks that ‘at present one mocks a man who
imitates the mute [Apollonius]; that’s how much the world is corrupted’ (1.293). The personal is the erudite when he asks us sarcastically to ‘admirez l’exactitude’ of an author who refers to ‘vol. 1’ of an author who wrote two books, without telling us which one (1.315). He allows himself an irony when he accuses Blount, ‘qui aime tant l’érudition,’ of omitting an obvious quotation (3.264).

There is only one place that I have found where Castillon spells out his personal attitude to the whole project. Since Castillon had been ordered by the king to do this translation, he could not exactly say up front in the preface – or in the conclusion, where the king was likely to look, too – that he hated Blount, Philostratus, and Apollonius. His personal attitude does not emerge explicitly until deep into the first volume, buried in a note on page 382, where Philostratus reports that an Assyrian respected Apollonius when he said that he understood all languages, and even all silences. Castillon says: ‘I avow my malice; I am moved to laugh, and I take Apollonius for a fool’ (1.382). One guesses that he hoped the king would not read this far.

What did Frederick think of Castillon’s translation of Philostratus? We do not know. We know he received it, because it was in his library at the Nouveaux Palais. 24 But it is not mentioned in Frederick’s correspondence with Voltaire, nor in the major work on the relations between the two, Christiane Mervaud’s Voltaire et Frédéric II. 25 It is not mentioned in Frederick’s letters to d’Alembert, nor in other letters of the years 1774–6, nor in numerous biographies of the king. 26 One can only speculate that he looked briefly at the four-volume set, but that it did not make much of an impression. There is no record that he did anything to retaliate against Castillon for his temerity.

The last point raises the question: what were the limits of what Castillon could get away with? We do not know how much he sweated when the book was published and before he knew the king’s reaction, if any. But he evidently did not think that the book as he handled it would cost him his head. General answers to this sort of question can be gleaned from several bodies of argument about Frederick II and the nature of late eighteenth-century monarchism. One is that, contrary to stereotypes about absolute monarchy and the baleful power of the Prussian state, the fact was that the state had a great deal of difficulty controlling its agents. 27 It did not have either the personnel or the administrative technology for truly close control over its subjects. If they played by certain rules – in this case the rules of scholarship – they could subvert the intentions of the king. We can guess that if the king had demanded
Castillon’s head for insubordination, courtiers and other scholars in and around the administration would have defended him, explaining that this was harmless scholarship. What was the charge going to be? ‘Too many notes’?

A second body of argument with some answers would focus on Frederick II’s ‘liberalism.’ The king had cultivated an internationally famous self-image as ‘le roi philosophe.’ It seems likely that he could not even think of demanding Castillon’s head because he had internalized a good number of Enlightenment ideals. He obviously believed in a certain amount of freedom of expression and accepted the rules of the scholarly game. Under those rules, and in the determinate circumstances of 1774 Prussia, the king could force a scholar to write for his party line, but he could not stop him from using all of his talents and technical skills to subvert the message.

A good example of the sort of liberal intellectual atmosphere that prevailed in Potsdam and Berlin can be found in a piece of the reception history of Castillon’s translation. The translation of Apollonius was not announced in the *Nouveaux mémoires* of the Prussian Academy for 1774 or 1775, perhaps because Castillon made it known that he did not want to be associated with it and did not want it to be widely publicized. However, the Perpetual Secretary of the Academy, Jean Henri Samuel Formey, signalled that he had read the translation in a discourse on the occasion of the celebration of the king’s birthday in 1775 which was published in the *Nouveaux mémoires* for that year. He notes that Blount had quoted Montaigne in commentary on Apollonius, and proceeds to repeat what Montaigne had said, which was that royal courts are full of vain ostentation and flattery exaggerating the valour and grandeur of the sovereign. This could, of course, have been taken by an observer as a dig at the king, except that the king had long ago publicly rejected courtly ostentation. Yes, mediocre princes are over-praised, Formey asserts, but great princes like Frederick II deserve all the praise they get. The savvy old man, who had managed to please Frederick well enough to keep his post as secretary since 1746 – and he kept it until his death in 1797 – evidently knew that these remarks would not be taken as satire. In the liberal intellectual atmosphere that Frederick had cultivated, you could skate very close to the truth in talking to tyrants, but protect yourself and salvage decorum by ostensively denying that you are talking about the one in front of you.

It is perhaps not possible to give more of an answer to the question as to how far Castillon could have gone in defending Christianity than to
summarize the facts of what he did. Over and over, his translation tells us that Blount misquotes, misattributes, misspells, retails errors; Philostratus is mistaken; Damis is a liar; and Apollonius is a fool.

Castillon turned a single accessible volume in Blount’s edition into two thousand pages in four volumes. The few who would bother to read the whole work, together with Castillon’s numerous notes, could not avoid coming away thinking that Blount’s whole enterprise was discredited.\(^3\)

This point is confirmed by a review in the *Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen* in 1775. The reviewer observed that the dedication to Clement XIV was a satire, with nothing else new. ‘No one would lightly reject a translation of Philostratus in and of itself. But a translation of a bad English translation that was made after a bad Latin translation, with just as bad commentary, all of this makes for a special appearance.’ The reviewer goes on to observe that ‘Charles Blount is well enough known in the list of Freethinkers’ and that ‘parts are taken from Lord Herbert of Cherbury’ (also a well-known deist). He also historicizes the book: Blount’s declamations against priestcraft may have been necessary at the end of the seventeenth century, but are not now necessary at the end of the eighteenth. He accepts Castillon’s claims, noting that Blount’s notes are often trivial, mostly mistaken geographical, mythological, and historical commentary that had long been corrected, and reports that the translator (Castillon) has taken the trouble to correct Blount’s errors and false expressions ‘here and there’ (he could have said, ‘everywhere’!).\(^3\)

Castillon’s translation of Blount belongs in a genre of radical, sceptical, atheistic, or subversive texts translated and edited by moderately progressive and often self-consciously Christian scholars in the eighteenth century. Jean-Bernard Mérian, Samuel Formey, and Johan Georg Sulzer translated into French and German and introduced sceptical texts by David Hume, using their introductions and notes to blunt that author’s anti-Christian message.\(^3\) Louis Frédéric Ancillon wrote out an imagined ‘Dialogue between Berkeley and Hume’ in French in which he reconciled texts from both authors with each other and with enlightened Christianity.\(^3\) Such authors could respect the intellectual acuity of the sceptics, but still seek to draw their sting in order to save morality and Christianity. Castillon clearly did not respect Apollonius’s philosophical acuity, but followed the same strategy of drawing his sting.

A few years later Frederick asked Castillon to translate Cicero’s *Aca-
demica, perhaps again to mortify him, and to assuage Frederick’s curiosity about this sceptical text, since he could not read Latin. Castillon did as he was told, bringing out a text in 1779 that followed the strategy he had pioneered with Blount’s Philostratus of using the tools of the scholar to discredit scepticism and to Christianize Cicero and Sextus Empiricus.35

If, in this duel of wits, the king had hoped that Blount’s and Cicero’s anti-Christian message would be made widely available and change public opinion, then his hopes were probably disappointed. His servant, the pious mathematician who defended Christianity, apparently won these skirmishes.

Notes

2 Ibid., 74. In French, ‘canon’ means both the English ‘cannon’ and ‘canon.’
of texts by Newton, Cicero, Sextus Empiricus, and Philostratus was an important part of the process of the Enlightenment.


12 Quoted in L.D. Reynolds and N.G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature* (Oxford 1974), 140. Dzielska, *Apollonius*, points out that Minutius, a friend of Gian Francesco Pico della Miranda, who had been condemned because of his studies of magic in 1487, was no doubt worried about attention from the church (194–7). Did he publish it simply out of scholarly publisher competitiveness or humanistic thoroughness, or because there was something about its message that he did indeed like?


14 ‘The Treatise of Eusebius, the son of Pamphilus, Against the Life of Apollonius of Tyana,’ included in vol. 2 of Conybeare’s Loeb translation (n13 above), 485–605, following the tradition set by Manutius in 1501 and 1504.


16 Bogdan Krieger, *Friedrich der Grosse und seine Bücher* (Berlin 1914), 150.

17 *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. by L. Moland (Paris 1878) vol. 11, 96 (first printed as *La philosophie de l’histoire* in 1765). Apollonius is mentioned only once in Voltaire’s correspondence, in a letter of 1767 to someone he


19 Dzielska, Apollonius, 207, says it was reprinted in Amsterdam in 1779. Note that this volume must be used with caution. Dzielska refers to our author as ‘B. Castillon’ (198n, 207) and thinks he was French, although she correctly notes that he was ‘connected with the Enlightenment movement’ (207). She also thinks that Pierre Bayle was writing in 1820 (205n) and that Blount was pro-Church (198), although later he is a deist and initiates the ‘real ideological struggle with the Church’ (204). She refers to Christoph Martin Wieland as ‘P. Wielands’ (209, 224) and Gabriel Naudé as ‘G. Nande Parisien’ (209n, 220).

20 Early in his correspondence with the printer, Castillon described his work as ‘par ordre du Roi,’ but later he added a note saying ‘Gardez vous bien de dire nulle part qu’Apollonius est imprimé par ordre du Roi’ (‘Do not say anywhere that Apollonius was published by order of the King’). Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Handschriftenabteilung. Nachlass Decker, Bd. 7, Bl. 149, 24 May 1774 and Bl. 162, Aug. 26, 1774. It may be that at one point Frederick’s name was going to appear on the volume, which may have been a further attempt by Castillon to distance himself from the project. But perhaps Frederick – or some of the other members of the academy or its officials – found out about this and decided it would be imprudent.

21 Dzielska, Apollonius, 207, asserts (but provides no evidence) that the dedication was written by Frederick II and intended as an irony. There is an insider reference in the pseudonym: Hierocles had written his work under the name Philalethes.

22 Thus, Castillon might have deserved a place in Anthony Grafton’s The Footnote: A Curious History (Cambridge 1997). Grafton does not have a discussion of footnotes as discrediting strategy in precisely the sense of Castillon’s practice.

23 Castillon is retailing one of Eusebius’s critiques of Apollonius here.

24 Krieger, Friedrich, 150.

26 The correspondence with d’Alembert is in J.D.E. Preuss, ed., *Oeuvres de Frédéric le Grand*, vols. 23–4 (Berlin 1850–4). In the years 1766–8 d’Alembert wrote to Frederick several times to recommend Castillon and his son for positions including royal astronomer (24: 404–7, 427–32), but there is no mention later at the time of the Philostratus translation. There is also no mention of Castillon’s Philostratus in Thomas Carlyle, *History of Friedrich II of Prussia, Called Frederick the Great*, 6 vols. (London 1905 [orig. 1858–65]); David Fraser, *Frederick the Great, King of Prussia* (London 2000); or Robert Asprey, *Frederick the Great: The Magnificent Enigma* (New York 1986).


28 Perhaps to make sure he would have their sympathy, Castillon wrote to Decker to make sure that Frederick’s friends de Catt and Quintus received copies of the translation at the same time that the king did. Nachlass Decker, Bd. 7, Bl. 168, 11 November 1774.

29 Castillon’s translation of Cicero carried his name and his status as a member of the academy, and it was announced in the *Nouveaux mémoires de l’Academie* for 1779 (Berlin 1781), 40, 43.


31 One piece of evidence for the case that Castillon probably thought his method worked is that he did not distance himself so much from the volume as to avoid all mention of it. As late as 1786 he was still requesting copies of it from the printer to give to friends. Nachlass Decker, Bd. 7, Bl. 177, 1786.

32 *Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen*, no. 14, Feb. 1775, 105–7. The reviewer was Heyne. Castillon’s Blount was apparently not reviewed in 1774 or 1775 in Friedrich Nicolai’s influential *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, which generally reviewed only books in German but did review Castillon’s Cicero a few years later.


A French Translation of Sextus Empiricus from the Prussian Academy, 1779,’
Denina, La Prusse littéraire sous Frédéric II (Berlin 1790–1 [Geneva 1968]),
vol. 1, 323, reports that ‘Le roi philosophe lui fit traduire la vie d’Apollonius
de Tyane, & les livres académiques de Cicerón.’
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PART IV

Reflections on the British Monarchy
George – third of that name to be sovereign of the Kingdom of Great Britain, and third of his Hanoverian family to rule by the name – succeeded his grandfather in the year 1760, and reigned until the year 1820; a long period, full of momentous changes, including the American and French revolutions, the twenty years of war against revolutionary and Napoleonic France, the extension and transformation of the British empire (a term of by no means simple meanings) and the beginnings of an industrial and class-based political society. During these sixty years the nature of British monarchy changed greatly. I would like to focus on the first forty of them, when George’s political activity was at its height, in order to understand the foundations of that monarchy in a history we call early modern, with a view to approaching the transition into one we might call modern. These terms are neither sacred nor self-explanatory, and we have to beware of falling into a ‘whig history’ in which the triumph of the modern is the only narrative worth following. Nevertheless, great changes did occur, and it is hard to avoid using that word in thinking and speaking of them. I shall therefore pursue the history of monarchy under George III with a view to travelling from a time when what mattered was the problems the Crown had inherited from the seventeenth century to one when these problems had to be restated in a context which was to endure through the nineteenth century and beyond. Notice that my language implies that history is not merely invented but actually happens; it consists of situations involving change and continuity, in which we find ourselves living and which do not disappear merely because language has shifted.

My title is ‘Monarchy in the Name of Britain,’ and I have spoken of ‘the Kingdom of Great Britain’ and ‘British monarchy.’ On succeeding
to the throne of this monarchy (wherever that throne was) George III issued a proclamation in which he said that he ‘gloried in the name of Britain,’ using a spelling which indicated the name of the realm, not of its inhabitants. George did not say that he himself was a ‘Briton,’ a term in general but not definitive use, but that ‘Britain’ was the name of the kingdom he was proud to rule. What this meant, why he said it, and why saying it had consequences he did not always expect or welcome, are questions that require our consideration.

George’s kingdom was a multiple monarchy; as well as the Kingdom of Great Britain, he ruled a subordinate kingdom in Ireland, some island appanages scattered around the ocean in which his two kingdoms were situated, and in the Caribbean and on the North American mainland a large number of what were called colonies, a term whose meaning had, with momentous consequences, never been made clear. We do not understand George’s language or his problems, however, if we do not understand that in addition to all this, the character of a multiple monarchy had not deserted his central realm, the Kingdom of Great Britain, in which he gloried. This kingdom was a union, united but not unified. It had to be understood in terms of two entities, England and Scotland, which had not ceased to be kingdoms in becoming a kingdom, and continued to enjoy – or to suffer – distinctive histories, political and religious, to say nothing of social and cultural structures.

If ‘Britain’ was a term denoting the union of England and Scotland, to say that George ‘gloried in the name of Britain’ should have meant that he took equal pride in both the histories – or, if you prefer, national identities – over which he found himself sovereign. It is, however, extremely doubtful that this was what he meant, or whether his subjects would have approved his saying so. Here we confront the unwelcome, probably not unalterable, but certainly undeniable fact of English predominance over all other components of the multiple monarchy of Great Britain. This predominance is of course due to the superior size, wealth, and power of England; but its meaning is not to be found simply in the domination, hegemony, or empire exercised by England over the other components. This domination came with a history of England, a history loaded with problems arising from its own course, which the English were engrossed in solving or containing. Their domination of others was in part the product of their need to manage these problems; the ignorance or inattention they showed towards others was the product of the pressing demands their problems made upon them. It is not clear that this has ceased to be true today.
George III had to cope with being the king of England, and this did not cease to dominate his thinking as he confronted the crises of American independence, Indian empire, and Irish union. Even when he said that he ‘gloried in the name of Britain,’ he was addressing his English subjects and making a statement in a language they used about themselves. We have now to consider what monarchy was in English history, and how the problems arising from that history confronted George in 1760.

‘England’ was an ‘empire.’ This statement, introducing the Act of Supremacy (1534), a crucial statute of the reign of Henry VIII, implied that the realm was held together by the king’s supremacy or sovereignty in the two fields of law and church. All law was the king’s law, declared in his courts and in Parliament; and from the time of the aforementioned statute all ecclesiastical sovereignty, short of sacerdotal authority, was exercised by the king as supreme head and governor of the Church in, or of, England. ‘Empire’ meant that the king shared this sovereignty with no other prince; that he exercised it over subordinate realms, provinces, or colonies was a secondary, though not an invisible, meaning of the term. It meant that the king governed the realm, and that since he was part of the realm or the realm part of him, in the relationship of head and body, in being governed by the king the realm governed itself. There was to arise the dreadful and bloody question whether the head existed apart from the body; whether the body might make war upon the head in order to recall it to their union.

English history, down to 1760 and through the reign that followed, is in essence the story of how this imperial unity persisted through the divisive, disruptive, and disastrous conflicts to which its uncertainties gave rise. Part of that incredibly complex history is to be explained by the relationship – or lack of one – that came to exist between England, governed and defined by the sovereignty the king-in-Parliament exercised over both church and state, Scotland, where the only head of the Church could be Christ himself, and Ireland, where the Anglican formula confronted the demographic reality of a Catholic majority and a small but vocal Scottish minority in the province of Ulster. But a far more vivid and obsessive legacy of English history is the civil wars of England, wars of religion which had both caused and been caused by a persistent dynastic instability, traceable back to the reign of Henry VIII himself. The monarchy to which George III succeeded owed its current existence to the revolutions of 1688, when James II had been effectively deposed, and 1714, when George’s Hanoverian and Lutheran ancestors
had been brought in to head the Church of England before James’s Catholic son and grandson could return to it – as they never did before it was too late. The uncertain relation of the Hanoverians to the Church, and therefore, the essential structure of the realm, combined with a great many other factors – including the personal – to ensure that they were never much loved. In George’s childhood (1745–6) the last dynastic, civil, and religious war in the island of Britain – fought mainly in the realm of Scotland but also in the history of England – had removed the threat of the Stuarts. In the opinion of Edward Gibbon – whose historical judgment may as well be taken seriously – it was the Stuarts’ defeat, coupled with the organization of a national militia and above all ‘the accession of a British prince,’ born in England and baptized in the Church of England, that had reconciled the Tory gentry to the Hanoverian dynasty.²

Let us now review the inheritance of George III at his accession. Such phrases as ‘a British prince’ and ‘the name of Britain’ indicate that he found himself at the head of a multiple monarchy, one that was both simplified and complicated by the Union of the English and Scottish parliaments concluded in 1707, but between whose component parts the effective link was allegiance to Crown and person. Monarchy was thought of as sacred and essential. This was so less because the kingdoms and colonies could not be held together without it, than because the history of the realm of England presented monarchy as the necessary and even divine alternative to the unthinkable. In asking the question to which the editors of this volume direct our attention, ‘Why monarchy at all?’ one must never lose sight of the fact that in English memory the alternative to monarchy was not the republic, but dissolution of the government, civil war, and regicide: an English experience barely more than a hundred years old, still vividly recalled as the worst thing the nation had ever suffered. George found himself at the head of an institutional structure designed to provide against a recurrence of the civil wars of the 1640s and the dynastic wars held at bay by, and therefore inherent in, the partial settlements of 1688, 1700, and 1714. That the alternative dynasty had ceased to be a threat after 1745 was so recent that by 1760 the public was hardly used to it, nor had absence of this threat altered the history of England.

The institutional structure to which I refer had two faces, both inherent in the revolution wrought in the reign of Henry VIII: the royal supremacy in the church, and the royal unity with Parliament. The former implied the unity of church and state, as well as the establish-
ment of a church as the religion of the realm, without which no one could see how the realm could be either religious or governed. The program of toleration, which had been in force as far back as the Act of 1689, when it was not based on the deistic statement that religion was irrelevant to government, was essentially a program of indulgence, which the church and state saw fit to offer to those of alternative beliefs. To go beyond it, as began to be advocated during George III’s reign, was more than a demand for greater toleration. It was a demand that the state abdicate its right to give toleration or to withhold it. This was a revolutionary demand, achieved by the American republic but not in the history of the English, Scottish, or British kingdoms. George III, who had no problem with toleration, could never consent to disestablishment, and there were to be momentous consequences in 1801, when he thought he was being asked to conceive something akin to it.

The second bulwark against remembered civil war was the unity of king-in-Parliament. Here we may examine language once again. Since 1649, a primary meaning of the term ‘republic’ had been ‘government without a king or house of lords’: a regime thrust by civil war upon a nation which had never much wanted it. But in an older meaning of the term, traceable in England to 1642 (and in classical and neo-classical literature it was much older still), ‘monarchy’ and ‘republic’ became nearly indistinguishable, because the latter denoted a harmony or balance among the three powers of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. In England these could be translated as king, lords, and commons or, in the language of separated powers, as executive, judiciary, and legislative. Moreover, though England’s form of government was never represented as a separation of powers, it was possible, and in 1760 quite usual, to describe England as having a ‘matchless constitution,’ in which the three had originated independently and worked out a balance or harmony among themselves. This formula, of course, left ample room for independent action by the monarch on his own responsibility. It was agreed that to strip him of this would be to reduce the monarch to a mere ritual figurehead, like the Venetian doge. (Maurice of Nassau, Stadtholder of the Dutch Republic, had said he would rather row in a galley than be Duke of Venice). The question became complicated, however, when it concerned the independence of the king’s actions in Parliament. It was agreed, not quite consistently with the doctrine of the balanced constitution, that king and Parliament were one and that ultimate, or at least legislative sovereignty was exercised by the king-in-Parliament – a concept as metaphysical as it was politically realistic. The
king chose his own ministers, but those ministers had to enjoy the confidence of Parliament. The question was how this relationship was to be managed. It was here that George III was to encounter the first political storm of his reign, one whose language and imagery he never quite shook off.

George found his monarchy engaged in a hugely successful war and at a point where the war might be expanded further still. He believed it should be terminated at the point already reached; it was part of this question that the war had something like doubled the national debt and, thus, was at once a major support and a major embarrassment to the Hanoverian system of government. The war was being conducted by a powerful alliance of Whig politicians, members of an aristocracy whose power had persisted and increased since the Hanoverian succession in 1714. George seems genuinely to have coupled his desire to bring the war to an end with his desire to lessen the Crown’s dependence on this political alliance. In his entourage, especially in his close relationship with his former tutor Lord Bute, there was prevalent a political language which proposed that monarchy should be independent of aristocracy and that a principal threat to this independence was the Whig aristocracy’s control over the monarchy’s power to appoint men to greater and lesser offices and perquisites. This was part of a rhetoric which had been building up for nearly a century, according to which a primary threat to Parliament’s independence of the Crown was the monarch’s power to corrupt members of Parliament by appointing them to office and exercising patronage. This power, as was not inaccurately perceived, had been vastly expanded by the growth of a military-fiscal system – standing army and public credit – designed to defend the Revolution of 1688 and prosecute the wars against France that were still going on seventy-five years later. George III and Lord Bute, therefore, in seeking to decrease their dependence on the Whig politicians, were stirring up a system of patronage in which both monarchy and aristocracy were so heavily involved that for either to seek to lessen the power of the other was to risk that both would be blamed for the excesses of the system, which for the next half-century went by the name of Old Corruption. In this period, it may be, the role of patronage was slowly being diminished. This did not lessen, however, and may have increased, the fury with which it was denounced.

Here one may enter upon the political history of George’s reign, a subject of such terrifying complexity that in the mid-twentieth century it became a field of expertise into which one ventured at one’s peril. I
have no intention of doing so. Nevertheless I do think that one can bet-
ter understand the monarchy of George III by exploring some of the
imagery that came to surround it – even though the expert historiogra-
phy just mentioned was devoted to exploding this imagery, which often
thoroughly deserved exploding. What actors in history thought was
going on in their time is often as important as what historians are able
to show was happening, and we are dealing with a period in which
actors quite often believed what they were saying, however false their
consciousness may have been. George III, like others before him, was
ferociously attacked, from more than one quarter, as guilty of the very
evils of which he thought he was trying to rid himself, and his own lan-
guage was often interpreted in ways he did not intend. By saying that he
‘gloried in the name of Britain,’ for example, he may have intended to
convey that his kingdom of Britain mattered more to him than his elec-
torate of Hanover, to which his grandfather had been accused of sacri-
ficing the interests of the islands. Within a few years, however, these
words were used to charge him with dependence on a parcel of beggarly
Scots, by whose aid (Lord Bute was a Stewart) he was supposedly seeking
to restore the monarchy to what it had been before 1688.

Scots were detested by Tories because they were not Anglicans and by
both Tory and Commonwealth opponents of the Whig regime because
they were perceived to be part of the structure of patronage and depend-
dence that kept the military-fiscal state in being. In seeking (however
inconclusively) to free the monarchy from Whig tutelage, George might
have been thought to be setting himself in opposition to some aspects of
that regime. Instead he found himself accused of both perpetuating and
perverting it. The Whig aristocratic groups that George III had ex-
cluded from office developed the myth of a court faction, either headed
by Bute and his countrymen or operating from deeper and more secret
levels, working to monopolize court patronage and to use it to prevent
any independent ministry from taking or retaining office as leaders of
an independent Parliament. Edmund Burke was the author of a classic
formulation of this myth, in his *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discon-
tents*, published in 1770. The roots of this argument lay as far back as
1688 and a little earlier. It was the expansion of the state’s military and
fiscal powers since the revolution, however, that gave rise to the opinion
that, though that event had put a stop to the Crown’s claim to an exces-
sive prerogative, it had at the same time encouraged the growth of the
Crown’s influence, as exercised through patronage and public credit.
Between the extremes of Jacobitism and republicanism, there was a mid-
dle ground, where it was held that instead of bringing in William of Orange with his wars and war finance, it might have been better to retain James II and impose on him a reduction of the Crown’s powers, both formal and informal. Burke’s *Present Discontents* contains the first part of the argument. For the second we may turn to Catharine Macaulay, a formidable critic of both Burke and the king, who held that monarchy and aristocracy had become equally corrupted by the system of patronage which had grown up since the revolution.3 Somewhere behind Macaulay may be discerned the radical position, once held by John Locke, that what had occurred in 1688–9 had been a true revolution, in the sense of a dissolution of government and a reversion of power to the people, on whose sovereignty the government of England – it was harder to apply this to Britain – had rested ever since.

Burke, an apologist for the Whig aristocracy, never adopted this position; it was to divide him from Richard Price in 1789 and Charles James Fox in 1793. Mention of Fox, however, should remind us that there were members of the aristocracy who were prepared to adopt this quasi-revolutionary language, in common with turbulent street politicians like John Wilkes. The Whig connections thrust out of power by George III in the late 1760s (and, it may be said, he displayed considerable political skill and ruthlessness in doing so) turned against him arguments which had formerly been used against them, as well as arguments which might challenge as well as reinforce the bases of their own power. Such is the measure of their hatred – it is not too strong a word – of George III and what they thought he was doing. The limits of George’s objectives became, in some way, less important than the Whig myth which now sprang up, that of a king (or his evil counsellors) seeking to unseat all ministries and to render Parliament impotent through a monopoly of political patronage. This myth remained operative throughout George’s reign; it was adopted by American revolutionaries and other followers of Thomas Paine and in English historiography for long afterwards. It took the historians of the middle twentieth century to explode it.

What does this tell us about the monarchy of George III? Let us begin with the rapid transition from the 1740s, when the threat to Hanoverian kingship was still Jacobite, dynastic, and religious, to the 1760s and after, when the exercise and even the legitimacy of royal power was challenged by arguments derived from the revolutions that had brought the Hanoverians to the throne. If we can avoid a whig history in which the second set of values was predestined to replace the first, we may arrive at
the realization that the British *ancien régime* was, like others, ambivalent and partly modern. It was still vital to preserve the imperial monarchy in church and state; it had been threatened throughout its history by causes originating before and since its establishment. Intense awareness of the legitimacy (to churchmen, the sacredness) of monarchy persisted, coupled with an equally intense uncertainty whether any reigning dynasty, from Hanoverian and Stuart back to Lancaster and York, had provided monarchy with the legitimacy to which it was entitled. To understand Anglo-British history it is useful to bear in mind that Charles I had been executed for failure to be a king, Louis XVI for being one. The ferocious satires and caricatures of his reign presented George III as a ridiculous figure, never as a demonized one. The Whig conviction that he was party to a conspiracy against the constitution broke surface only in the American colonies.

Monarchy after 1688 was also founded on one’s reading (several were possible) of what had occurred then: Price and Burke responded to the news of 1789 by debating what had occurred a hundred years before. James II had been overthrown in the name of Protestant kingship, but the threat of Popery had also been a threat of arbitrary government. The images of monarchy and liberty were inextricably joined, and English loyalism and churchmanship were inseparable from an English conviction that they were a free people whose liberties were guaranteed. This conviction had been so far communicated to Enlightened Europe that Britain in the late eighteenth century played a role like that of the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first: that of the rather free (but over-powerful) society which critics, at home and abroad, love to denounce for not being free enough, and for being false to its own principles. Here we encounter the problem of the double standard, to which I tried to direct attention at a conference held at the Clark Library in 2002. The liberal society can always be more severely judged than its rivals, for the reason that it exposes itself to more standards of judgment; the problem lies in how its citizens move as easily as some of them do to believing that its moral failures render their society less legitimate than its less liberal opponents. Under George III the Hanoverian regime moved very rapidly from being challenged dynastically to being challenged democratically, and during the wars against the American and French revolutions, discontented patriots, both aristocratic and democratic, came to believe that the monarchy’s perceived monopoly of patronage meant that England was a tyranny and that the real enemy
was at home. Something like the twentieth-century concept of revolutionary defeatism began to appear in a culture that was neither revolutionary nor modern.

What Burke called the Present Discontents were caught up in the escalating American crisis. This can, of course, be considered in the context of the development of American history; but we are dealing with a period in which American and British history were not yet known to be separate. It is of interest to notice how quickly colonial assemblies and opinion-makers took up the Whig myth in which George and his friends were supposed to be monopolizing patronage and seeking to overthrow the constitution; it is as if Whigs, Londoners and Americans, were all caught up in that closed ideology, conducive to conspiracy theories, studied by Bailyn in *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* and by Hofstadter in ‘The Paranoid Style in American Politics.’ The fighting in the colonies was widely perceived to be a civil war, which there, of course, it was; one may ask, however, how far there was civil war, in which sympathies were engaged on one side or the other, in the British or Anglo-American world as a whole. Those – and there were not a few of them – who saw the revolt of the colonies as part of a crisis in Hanoverian government everywhere (except indeed Hanover) sometimes used language that suggested a revolution, dissolution of government, or return to first principles, in the regime as a whole. That this was not much more than talk was revealed by that significantly counter-revolutionary document, the Declaration of Independence, which, aiming at the creation of a new nation, converted a civil war into a war between sovereign states, and instead of inciting the British people to overthrow their unjust government denounced them for their continuing support of it, and informed them that they were now at war with an American people, which had broken its ties with them. The American Revolution was not for export.

King George may possibly have viewed these globally transforming events, as some twentieth-century historians did, in a narrowly English focus: simply as episodes in the high politics of the struggle between parliamentary factions and the independent agency of the Crown, in which the monarch must either retain his own ministers or have them imposed on him. The adoption of the Whig myth by the parliamentary opposition, however, meant that this struggle was seen in terms looking back to the civil wars of the seventeenth century and the eighteenth-century attempts to compose them. The opposition was sympathetic with the Americans, not because they thought they themselves were in a state of
civil war with the king and his followers, but because they thought they were in a civil war which the government had unjustly or ineptly imposed on them. In consequence they not uncommonly (and this is true of Burke and others at the apex of Whig politics) welcomed American military successes and deplored British, because they thought the political system to which they belonged was on the wrong side in a civil war. If this had not happened before, it was because previous civil wars had been on issues of religion and the dissolution of government, rather than issues within shared constitutional and moral principles. Some of George III’s actions early in his reign, and the ways in which these had been interpreted, had gone into the making of this historically changed situation.

From the time when the American crisis began to escalate towards rebellion and war, and through the remainder of his active reign, George III found himself involved in the problem of imperial monarchy – meaning, as we saw earlier, the problem of extending the imperium of a centrally English kingship and state to the government of realms beyond England and/or not English. Indeed, Scotland, Ireland, and the American colonies presented different aspects of this problem. To understand George III’s monarchy, however, we need to keep in mind that it was controlled by English historical realities – the need to liquidate the memory and fear of the recurrence of civil war and the need to maintain the monarchy’s unity with the Church of England and an essentially English Parliament. George would certainly have endorsed the proposition, put into words by Thomas Pownall, that the monarchy was now so essentially a monarchy of the king-in-Parliament that the claim being put forward, first by Americans and then by Irish, that their assemblies were under the Crown but not the Parliament, could simply not be admitted. It is a paradox that this king, accused constantly of subverting the proper relationship between monarch and Parliament, found himself pledged to maintain its essential unity – and being attacked for doing so. We may say that George III was learning the lesson of liberal politics, that once you are targeted as being in the wrong you are wrong whatever you do. There is a further lesson to be learned, however, which is that responsibility implies legitimacy. Whenever his monarchy found its legitimacy impugned – when George III was told he owed his throne to the people and threatened with the fate of James II or Charles I, and even when the Americans dethroned him from the headship of a confederacy he had not known he exercised – there remained the implication that only the monarchy could resolve the
problems of the Anglo-British kingdom, and that if it was illegitimate this was only because it was not legitimate enough. George III was threatened with extreme disrespect, but not with revolution; even the unbelievably derisive caricatures of his reign are not without a leaven of loyalism.

The year 1783 marked a turning point in George’s career as an active political force. It also marked, of course, the end of the unsuccessful war against the American rebellion and the recognition of the United States as an independent power. Nevertheless, it is genuinely hard to tell how deeply this loss of empire affected the British political imagination. It was the end of a civil war about which opinion had been profoundly divided, and perhaps people were more glad that it was over than anxious to pursue the divisions. As for the loss of empire, some were glad to see the last of troublesome family members who had refused all incorporation into it but had not really challenged its foundations. If the British cared for global empire – and already this was a question of how far they were willing to pay the costs of it – they found it in the naval supremacy they had not really lost, and in the acquisition in India of empire in the altogether new sense of dominion over millions of people of alien cultures. This was to prove problematic in many new ways, and it became part of the problem of George III’s monarchy. The loss of America (other than Canada and the West Indies) was, of course blamed by discontented patriots and Whigs out of office on George III and his ministers. There arose programmatic demands for reform, including the reduction of royal patronage, retailoring of the electoral system, and even revision of the system of religious toleration set up in 1689. But these peaked in 1780, when they were derailed by the Gordon riots. One other radical demand remained from the American crisis: the demand of Protestant Ireland – the Ascendancy from which Presbyterians as well as Catholics were excluded – for independence from Westminster control. This was a demand both less and more radical than those which Americans had made before 1776. It was made so by the circumstance that Ireland already was, however shadowily, a kingdom with a parliament of its own. American independence did not mark the end of empire, in the old sense of a multiple monarchy in which the integration of English politics remained a dominant need.

It remained dominant in the new problematics of empire in India. The perceived difficulty was how the vast wealth of Indian patronage and influence was to be distributed between the East India Company and the Crown. It was here that George III won the greatest political victory of his
life, when he destroyed the Fox-North coalition which had brought the opposition Whigs back to a share of power, by letting it be known in the House of Lords that any man who voted for the ministry’s East India Bill would be accounted the king’s personal enemy. This drastic deployment of personal monarchy – still a monarchy founded on influence rather than prerogative – was endorsed by the parliamentary classes in the election which followed, and King George found himself allied with the younger Pitt, who would manage Parliament for him for many years to come. The king had won his battle with the opposition Whigs, reduced to a faction headed by men of genius who would maintain the fiction that Parliament was corrupt and the liberties of England at an end.

An obvious absurdity in the world of actual politics looked very different, however, to those excluded from the political system and disposed to regard it as corrupt. There were semi-organized mass movements among the disenfranchised and the Dissenters who wanted to go well beyond the parliamentary system of 1719 or the ecclesiastical system of 1689. In this light the separation of church and state has a good claim to be considered the most revolutionary of American achievements. Thus, his supremacy in church as well as state can be seen as the centre point of the position George III would spend the rest of his active life defending. Yet, this position was hardly under attack, once Parliament took to voting down all petitions for relief of either Dissenters or Roman Catholics. The next crisis of George III’s reign occurred in 1789, when an onset of psychosomatic illness raised the possibility that the king might have to be replaced by a regent. It was then discovered that the most violent of parliamentary Whigs relied on the reversionary interest – the support of the heir to the throne – and Burke as well as Fox proclaimed his right of automatic hereditary succession in terms that would have raised eyebrows in the reign of Charles II and brought them just what they politically deserved. It was still a personal monarchy. Other news in the year 1789, however, was to convince almost everybody that they were living in a new world.

In debating whether the Hanoverian monarchy should be termed a British ancien régime, we need to remember that the word ancien means less ‘ancient’ than ‘ci-devant’; it is part of the definition of an ancien régime that it should have collapsed at the shock of the French Revolution. The British regime did not collapse. It was severely shaken, but it was used to that. Britain’s best-known intellectual response to the news from France was the debate between Richard Price and Edmund Burke over the meaning of the English revolution of a century before. Burke,
still an opposition Whig attacking the monarchy’s alliance with East India Company rule in India, knew very well that the foundations of 1688 were contestable and that it was a question of how that contestation was to be carried on. As regards the monarchy of George III, however, the impact of ‘revolution in France and the proceedings of several societies in London relative to that event’ is not to be measured in Burke’s essentially Whig language – which I have just quoted – but in an almost atavistic response by the ruling structure, down to its populist roots, affirming its foundations (which were not without their problems) laid down in the days of Henry VIII. Since the British ruling structure saw the French Revolution as an assault on all religion, and since it knew that its own religious foundations were in external and internal dispute, it took to affirming with vehemence the religious foundations of all civil society, and gave to its own history a reading as much high-church as it was low. The evangelical revival in Anglican Christianity reinvested the monarchy with its sacred character: George III was once more supreme governor of a church which proclaimed that the foundation of civil society was as much subordination, deference, and degree as it was liberty, independence, and enlightenment.

These claims were intensely disputed, and not uncommonly enforced by repression in England, as well as in Presbyterian Edinburgh, where Moderate enlightenment gave way to an age of ice. The war against revolutionary France which began in 1793 presents the spectacle of modern history’s first anti-war movement. A militant, and in many ways popular, loyalism appropriated ‘patriotism,’ hitherto a term of subversive and even republican meanings. But there was also a Whig, Dissenting, and in just as many ways popular opposition to the war, protesting that it was being waged against liberty, in alliance with the enemies of liberty, by a British government still under the suspicions which had persisted since the Present Discontents nearly thirty years before. It is hard for historians two hundred years later to write of these phenomena without letting their own sympathies show; the problem is to give each side its due moral weight. For George III this situation meant that his monarchy was both enhanced and contested, but the tension between extremes never reached the revolutionary point where the existing political process could not contain it.

George III thus found himself both a venerated and a derided figure, as the literature and caricatures of the 1790s and 1800s abundantly declare. If one says that the tensions of those years both challenged the
existing political system and were contained within it, this becomes easier to understand. The enmity to war and ministry and monarchy was real; revolutionary sympathy was real; and conspiracies and executions were real. Yet, some of what went on under these headings was not real at all. The cartoonist James Gillray, and his public, obviously knew quite well that Charles James Fox was not a blood-drinking Jacobin, but they also knew that it served him right to be caricatured as one. Fox, of course, was a survivor from the earlier years of George’s reign. He was so much an enemy to the king and his ministers as to rejoice at their defeats in their wars. Valmy, he said, was the best news he had heard since Yorktown, and on visiting Napoleon in Paris during the Peace of Amiens he was at least supposed to have said that liberty might be asleep in France but was dead in England. This is the language of subversion without revolution, and whether Fox used it or not we have entered the era in which it was possible, and it has been with us ever since. An anti-war movement is not a revolution, but it is nevertheless worth studying in its own right.

The war against revolutionary France differed from the war against revolutionary America. The latter was a civil war fought within the British system and its culture. The war with France – an old enemy wearing a new face – was national, ideological, and global, a war for counter-revolutionary survival and for oceanic empire. It did have one aspect, in the later part of George III’s reign, that belonged to the history of empire in the older, Tudor sense: the Irish crisis of 1798–1801, ending in the Union which attempted the incorporation of the Kingdom of Ireland into that of Great Britain. Here George III stepped upon the stage of active politics for perhaps the last time. He would by no means assent to the empowerment of Catholics to sit in the Parliament of the new kingdom, and he let it be known that any man who voted for such a measure would be considered the king’s personal enemy. In doing so he overthrew the ministry of William Pitt, as he had that of Fox and North seventeen years before; Pitt was able to return to power only after promising that Catholic emancipation to this level would not be mentioned again. To our liberal eyes, George III’s conduct appears archaic and disastrous, but in its context it was not ridiculous or irrational. George III had reason to think he was still the monarch of a church-state, in which office and counsel were reserved for members of the church of which he was head. Indeed, it was the Union with Ireland that would compel the partial dismantling of that church-state thirty years
later, and thus, in his last great political act, George III stood at a turning point in the history of his monarchy.

From all this, and from the miseries of his long mental twilight, George III emerged as a figure attracting more affection than respect. When Byron called him ‘an old, mad, blind, despised and dying king,’ the poet was using the language of the Whig aristocratic remnant to which he belonged. There is a not unaffectionate portrait of George at the pearly gates in Byron’s _A Vision of Judgment_, though even there we read ‘a worse king never left a realm undone,’ which he didn’t really: the outlook was unpromising but surmounted. George III’s greatest failure was perhaps as a father of sons; how the monarchy survived the Prince Regent and his brothers one does sometimes wonder. To quote the Duke of Wellington in a moment of some hyperbole, ‘They are the damnedest millstones about the neck of any government that could be imagined. They have insulted – _personally_ insulted – two-thirds of the gentlemen of England.’ The resilience of the system, however, was displayed in the fascinating palace manoeuvrings that led to the begetting of the Princess Victoria, through whom the kingdom received sixty years of passive but symbolic monarchy, while ridding itself both of the Duke of Cumberland – last of her uncles and too strong an Orangeman to be acceptable on the throne of the United Kingdom – and of the Kingdom of Hanover, in which the Salic Law was in force. In this perspective we may take our leave of George III, last of the personal monarchs and first of the sentimental. If we seek a modern equivalent and successor to his monarchy, it is clearly the American Presidency: a monarchy elected for a limited term, but required to establish personal relations with a legislature, while functioning surrounded by both a court and a palace.

**Historiographical note**

This essay has required only light footnoting; to attempt a bibliography of modern writings on the history of George III’s reign would be to overweight it. A summary of what has been happening may be of some use. Sir Lewis Namier and his followers (such as Romney Sedgwick, John Brooke, and J.B. Owen) established in the 1950s the importance of a ‘high politics’ view of the reign; high politics denoting the close interactions between leading politicians that characterize a political oligarchy. They rightly asserted that values, ideology, and issues of principle were of little significance to this wheeling and dealing, and wrongly concluded that they were never significant at all – as if ‘high politics’ ex-
hausted the reality of history. Post-Namier historians have examined the actions as well as the thoughts of those who recognized and criticized the ascendancy of high politics and the conduct of politics by an oligarchy. John Cannon has studied the politics of reform; George Rudé the politics of the street and the mob; E.P. Thompson the making of the English working class. It has emerged that Burke and Fox, when in opposition, actually believed in private much of what they were saying in public about corruption and the threat to liberty. The ‘Whig myth’ has not ceased to be a myth, but has been recognized as effective in history.

This recognition that history is in part made by the consciousness of those living in it has led to an explosion of issues in the history of an issue-driven reign. J.C.D. Clark has restored the Church of England to centrality, showing that England was a church-state, Scotland another, and Britain not one at all. In the two former, vehement objection to the requirement that citizenship be dependent on worship in an established church shows how powerfully entrenched this requirement was, and has led to the recognition of a ‘long eighteenth century,’ lasting in England from the 1660s to the 1830s, and in Scotland rather longer. Recognition of a ‘British’ dimension has ensued, in which English, Scottish, Irish, and American history interact, down to and through a complex series of crises and civil wars between 1774 and 1798. The diversities of religion, from episcopal England and presbyterian Scotland to divided Ireland, half-Scottish Ulster, and multi-congregational America, have been revealed and are playing their part in the new synthesis. This I have attempted to present in several chapters of *The Discovery of Islands: Essays in British history* (Cambridge, 2005).

The American Revolution disrupted the Hanoverian order, but the French divided it at a deeper level. England, in particular, displayed massive popular opposition to the wars against revolutionary France and a comparably massive popular loyalty in support of them. Gregory Claeys and J.E. Cookson have studied both sides of this divide, which separates the last quarter-century of George III’s reign from the thirty-five years preceding it. We can now see this period in the history of the British monarchy as an era of many transformations in many cultures.

**Notes**

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Index

Abbt, Thomas 12–13, 197, 205, 242–7, 253
absolutism, absolute monarchy 4, 6, 8, 11, 13, 45, 61, 68, 71, 73, 75, 177, 182, 184, 194–223, 230, 240–81
America, Americans 3, 14, 60, 74, 167–9, 255, 259, 285, 293–301
aristocracy, aristocrat 8, 20, 22, 26, 29–32, 35, 79, 106, 116, 121, 123, 126, 147, 176, 184–5, 202, 225, 256, 290–3, 300
Aristotle, Aristotelian 6, 7, 63, 65–7, 88, 127, 131, 272
Arnauld, Antoine 9, 47–51
Athens, Athenians 19–20, 30–1, 89, 91, 94–5
Bahrdt, Carl Friedrich 217, 232
Bartuchat, Wolfgang 35–8
Bayle, Pierre 8, 45–77, 140, 270
Blanning, Timothy 4
Blom, Hans 3–44
Blount, Charles 267–81
Bodin, Jean 11, 49, 73–4, 102, 105–6
Bossuet, Jacques-Bénigne 78–80, 86, 89, 91–2, 94, 102–3, 105, 136
Britain, British 4, 10–11, 13–14, 62, 68, 71, 74, 114, 164, 169, 204–5, 251, 283–302
Burke, Edmund 101–4, 106, 205, 291–4, 297–8, 301
Caesar Augustus 121–43
Calvinism, Calvinists 25, 48, 67, 72–3, 86, 154, 223, 269
Canada 3
Castillon, Jean de 267–81
Christian, Christianity 10, 13, 24, 72, 91, 93–5, 151–8, 160, 184–5, 217, 228, 268–70, 275–7, 298
Cicero 8, 80, 85, 94, 276–8
commerce, commercial 8, 21–2, 108, 110–11, 204, 223, 243
Condillac, Etienne Bonnot de 10, 144–61
conscience 45, 47, 51–3, 55, 58, 152
Constant, Benjamin 93–4, 258, 266
corruption, constitutionalism 7, 10, 19, 21, 27, 29, 32, 176, 181–6, 189, 195, 205, 243
Cromwell, Oliver 46, 50
De la Court, Pieter 8, 20–3, 24, 28–30, 36–7, 39

democracy, democratic 19, 22, 24, 29, 37, 113, 121–43, 149, 186, 252, 256, 293

Denmark, Danes 5, 11–12, 175–93

Descartes, Rene; Cartesian 34, 79, 105, 127–8, 268–9

Dutch 4, 5, 8, 19–44, 49, 62, 219

Eberhard, Johann August 13, 198, 250–4, 256–8

Edict of Nantes 9, 48, 54, 62, 71, 73–4, 154


Fénelon, François de 9, 78–100

Fielding, Henry 194–5, 197, 206


Frederick William II 12, 195, 204, 206, 210, 222–3, 228, 250


Garve, Christian 12, 196, 198, 206–12

Geneva 28, 73, 175, 177, 187, 244, 252

George III 14, 60, 285–302

Germany, Germans 5, 28, 72, 152, 164, 175, 179, 185, 197, 199, 204, 206, 210–11, 230–1, 240, 242–5, 251, 254, 259


Grégoire, Henri 166

Grotius, Hugo 19–22, 73–4, 134, 149, 158–9, 180

Haller, Albrecht von 205, 215

Hartley, David 162

Henry IV 48, 71, 154

Henshall, Nicholas 4, 105–6

heresy 47

Hobbes, Thomas 22, 25, 29, 34, 55, 61, 66–7, 73–4, 86, 92, 135, 149, 158–9, 272

Holberg, Ludvig 180–1, 189, 191

Horstbøll, Henrik 11–12, 175–93

Huguenots 5, 8–9, 45–59, 62, 65, 73–4, 79, 152–5

Hume, David 9, 60–77, 199, 276

immigrants 23

India 14, 287, 296

Inquisition 32, 153, 167, 217

Ireland, Irish 11, 14

Iselin, Isaak 203–5, 242

Israel, Jonathan 44

James II 50, 154, 287, 293, 295

Jansenism, Jansenists 86, 104, 109, 112, 114, 167

Jenkinson, Sally 9, 60–77

Jesus Christ 10–11, 89, 166–9, 217, 287
Index

Jew, Jewish 10, 25, 72, 162–72, 223, 230, 232
Juan Carlos I 7
Jurieu, Pierre 47–8, 50–1
justice 12, 49, 96, 150–1, 176, 179–82, 195, 210–11
Kant, Immanuel 13, 85–6, 221, 234, 242, 248–50
Klein, Ernst Ferdinand 242, 247–8, 254
Lacunza, Manuel 166–71
La Peyrère, Isaac 164
Lex Regia 176, 180–2, 188–9
Locke, John 22, 64, 69, 181, 268–9, 292
Louis XIV 9, 31, 39, 46–7, 54–5, 62, 65, 78–82, 84, 87, 91, 93, 110, 144–6, 149, 154, 210, 222
Lutheranism, Lutherans 67, 72, 151–2, 223, 287
Machiavelli, Niccolò 27, 33–4, 47, 64, 69, 92–4, 121, 135, 209, 272
Mallet, Paul-Henri 175, 187–9
Mandeville, Bernard 9, 13, 22, 39
Matheron, Alexander 37
Merlat, Elie 54–5
millenarianism, millenarians 10, 162–72
Molesworth, Robert 11, 178–80
Montesquieu, Baron de 6, 8, 12, 22, 39, 78, 103–18, 148, 159, 176, 179–81, 184–5, 189, 210–11, 243–8, 251–4, 257, 259–60
Mosher, Michael 9, 101–18, 261, 263, 266
Naples 5, 121–43
Napoleon 11, 163–7, 270, 285, 299
Netherlands, The; Holland 4, 5, 9, 13, 19–44, 53, 73, 199, 227, 250, 255, 289
Nicolai, Friedrich 12, 195, 197–8, 203–7, 212, 231, 280
Paganini, Gianni 10, 144–61
parliament 3, 4, 14, 114–15, 178, 287–90, 295–6
patriotism, patriots 3, 6, 12–14, 181, 195, 198–207, 212, 243–8, 253, 257, 293–8
Philostratus 267–81
Pilati, Carlo Antonio 267–8
Pocock, J.G.A. 14, 193, 235–302
Pontoppidan, Erik 181
Pope, Alexander 8, 60–1, 72
Popkin, Richard 10–11, 162–72
Protestant 8, 69, 74–5, 164–70, 268, 271, 293, 296
Prussia, Prussian 4, 5, 12, 197, 200–10, 217–81
Pufendorf, Samuel 134, 158–9, 180–1, 189, 196
resistance 9, 70
Reverdiel, Elie-Salomon-François 175, 177, 187–9
Riley, Patrick 9, 78–100
Roger, André 175–7, 181, 187–9
Roscher, Wilhelm 11, 240
Rothe, Tyge 184–6, 189
rule of law 6, 13–14, 177, 181, 247, 249, 255
Sauter, Michael 12, 217–39, 264
scepticism, sceptical 9–10, 23, 60–77, 122, 135, 137, 276
Scotland, Scottish 14, 74, 286–9, 295, 301
Simonutti, Luisa 9, 45–59
Skinner, Quentin 6, 7, 138
Smith, Adam 22
Sneedorf, Jens Schielderup 181, 186
Spain, Spanish 19–20, 32, 36, 146, 166–7, 255, 272
Spinoza, Benedict de 8, 19–44, 272
Stiles, Ezra 162–3
Struensee, Johann Frederik 182–4
Suhm, Peter Frederik 183–4, 188–9
Sulzer, Johann Georg 12, 197–202, 205, 207, 212, 276
Switzerland, Swiss 5, 12–13, 175–93, 199, 240–66, 268
Tacitus 19, 28, 36, 121, 124, 185, 259
Tocqueville, Alexis de 5, 103, 106–7, 115–16
toleration 9, 22, 32, 51–2, 58, 73, 144–61, 289, 296
Tortarolo, Edoardo 269
tyrrany, tyrant 29, 39, 49, 53–5, 70, 72, 122, 124, 293
Van der Zande, Johan 12, 194–216, 232
Van Gelderen, Martin 6, 7
Venice 31, 53, 166, 289
Versailles 78, 80, 93, 110, 144, 147, 149
Vico, Giambattista 10, 121–43
Viroli, Maurizio 5, 6
Voltaire 136, 145, 152, 206, 268, 270, 274
war 21–2, 45, 66, 69, 83, 96, 123, 145, 151–6, 176, 225, 231, 254, 288, 290, 292
William III 21, 39, 50, 73, 292
Woellner, Johann Christoph 12, 217
Wright, George 10, 121–43
Wyss, David 13, 254–6
Zimmermann, Johann Georg 13, 242, 244, 246–7
Zurbuchen, Simone 4, 12, 240–66