

**Washington and Lee University**

**BREAD AND CIRCUSES:  
THE CULT OF ANTIQUITY IN  
THE FRENCH REVOLUTION**

**HONORS THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
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*To Wesley*

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# A Note on Translation



Throughout this thesis, I quote eighteenth century sources from letters, books, and secondary readings. Literary conventions from that period seem to be extraordinarily fluid at the time, and since I am no expert on French or Latin translation, I have left the editing up to the author of the book from which I took the source. There may be, therefore, discrepancies in grammar or spelling from one section of the thesis to another. The reader can attribute this to my relative lack of knowledge of eighteenth century texts, and my utter dependance upon the translations given through secondary sources.

In addition, I have translated all titles in my thesis except one. I kept the French spelling of Rousseau's *The Social Contract* to keep it distinct from his social model of the same name. The reader will recognize, then, that when I write "*Du Contrat Social*" in the text, I am referring to the book. When I write "the Social Contract," I refer to Rousseau's idea.

# Table of Contents



Acknowledgments.....	iii
Note on Translation.....	iv
Introduction.....	vi
Chapter One: The Dawn of the Cult.....	1
Education in the Ancien Régime.....	3
The Classics of the <i>Philosophes</i> .....	9
Chapter Two: Morning in Eden.....	29
The Unheard Voice of Reason.....	30
The <i>Philosophes</i> and the Early Revolutionaries.....	36
Chapter Three: A Rising in the West.....	41
The American Education.....	42
American Neo-Classicism.....	50
Chapter Four: High Noon.....	58
The Need for a Cult.....	59
Rome Revisited.....	63
Conclusion.....	75
Bibliography.....	77

## Introduction



The Roman Juvenal wrote that the best way to quell civic unrest was to give the people what they want: bread and circuses. This thesis will explore Harold T. Parker's *Cult of Antiquity in the French Revolution*. Parker's work shows that the French Revolutionaries truly emulated and probably loved the classical models of Greece and Rome. In our study, we will focus upon the cult and attempt to determine whether it was an idealistic model or simply "bread and circuses": a sort of bridge between the masses and the nobility that arose to lead France following the demise of the *ancien régime*.

Throughout the thesis, we should bear in mind the advice of Livy to readers of his

*Book I*:

What chiefly makes the study of history wholesome and profitable is this, that you behold the lessons of every kind of experience set forth as on a conspicuous monument; from these you may choose for yourself and for your own state what to imitate, from these mark for avoidance what is shameful in the conception and shameful in the result.<sup>1</sup>

This essay is not an examination of the Greek and Roman past. Rather, it will explore a filtered classical past: one that the Revolutionaries of the eighteenth century recreated for their own times. The first portion of the thesis will focus on the conflict

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<sup>1</sup>Titus Livius, *Book I*, trans. B.O. Foster (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1919), 7.

between education and philosophy of pre-revolutionary France. The study will continue with a detailed discussion of the Enlightened *philosophes* and the assimilation of their ideas into pre-revolutionary society. Next, we will examine the American Revolution as a catalyst for later events in France. The final chapter of the thesis will explore different rhetorical and artistic manifestations of the cult. It will attempt to answer the main question of the thesis in light of Livy's quote: which lessons did the French state choose to take from the Ancients, and why?

CHAPTER 1  
THE DAWN OF THE CULT:  
*PHILOSOPHES AND COLLÈGES*



The symbolism and rhetoric of revolution characterized the years of the *ancien régime* as a dark age for France. Artists, writers, and even some historians portrayed the 1789 revolution as a new great dawn. Rabaut Saint-Etienne wrote “All the hopes of the nation turned toward M. Necker, just as people look for the rays of the sun after a long and disastrous storm.”<sup>1</sup> William Blake’s poem about the French Revolution is full of similar imagery:

But the dens shook and trembled, the prisoners look up and assay to shout; they listen, Then laugh in the dismal den, then are silent, and a light walks round the dark towers. For the Commons convene in the Hall of the Nation; like spirits of fire in the beautiful Porches of the Sun, to plant beauty in the desert craving abyss, they gleam On the anxious; all children new-born first behold them; tears are fled, And they nestle in earth-breathing bosoms.<sup>2</sup>

If the French Revolution was in fact a new dawn, it did not come to fruition overnight. The same is true for all aspects of the revolution, including the Cult of Antiquity. Many historians, including Daniel Mornet and Harold T. Parker, are quick to point out that the cult had many influences and intellectual origins. To understand the cult during the height of its power, we must first understand the cult in its embryonic stage. This chapter will focus on the early years of the cult, exploring it as a result of educational, political, and cultural experiences of the eighteenth century. Specifically, we will contrast the way the *philosophes* beheld the lessons of antiquity with the traditional

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<sup>1</sup>Jean Starobinski, *1789: Emblems of Reason*, trans. Barbara Bray (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1982), 83.

<sup>2</sup>The Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. David V. Erdman, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970), 3-4.

lessons of the *collèges de plein*. In both cases, we will examine the conflicting Greco-Roman ideals presented by both sides and analyze their potential influence on pre-revolutionary France.

## Education in the *Ancien Régime*

In pre-revolutionary France, the *collèges de plein exercice* and the universities enjoyed a unique monopoly. Generally, the *collèges* taught languages, math, and philosophy while universities focused on the three higher sciences of law, medicine, and the Church. Because there were a few exceptions, however, the only true difference between the two schools was that the university had the exclusive right to bestow the degree necessary to practice law, medicine, or religion.<sup>3</sup>

The fundamental aim of the French *collège's* six-year humanities course was to produce students who could speak, read and write Latin fluently. Brockliss argues that in this respect, Robespierre educational background was identical to that of Richelieu's.<sup>4</sup> The schools' core curriculum consisted of the study of Latin's linguistic principles; the student learned syntax, grammar, speech, vocabulary and the art of Latin prosody.<sup>5</sup> The eighteenth-century schools used a process similar to modern total immersion to

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<sup>3</sup>L.W.B. Brockliss, *French Higher Education in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 182.

<sup>4</sup>Brockliss, 178.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

ensure that every student would be a competent Latinist upon graduation. Throughout adolescence, the future members of France's professional élite studied the language and literature of ancient Rome for at least four hours a day. In the classroom, the future revolutionaries became, in Brockliss' words, "children of Rome" who spoke and wrote in the grand Ciceronian manner and knew the history of the late Republic and Augustan era in far greater detail than their own recent past.<sup>6</sup>

Parker also depicts an educational system that offered future cultists a uniform, if limited, knowledge of the Roman authors. Revolutionaries such as Robespierre, Desmoulins, Danton, and Brissot attended vastly different *collèges*. Robespierre and Desmoulins studied at Louis-le-Grand in Paris. Danton spent his time at Troyes, a *collège* maintained by the Oratoire religious order. Conversely, Brissot attended a smaller provincial *collège* at Chartres.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, each of these schools inculcated their students with the same values and lessons of the Roman past.

Whichever school they attended, revolutionaries-to-be were certain to learn that although the Romans had admirable qualities, their Republican government was inferior to the modern French monarchy. In his 1763 translation of Sallust, Jean-Henri Dotteville writes "When in times of peace and for two years running was there internal concord in

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 183.

<sup>7</sup>Harold T. Parker, *The Cult of Antiquity and the French Revolution* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1937), 8.

Rome?”<sup>8</sup> Teachers such as André Dacier portrayed a Rome in which a jealous and egalitarian crowd victimized exceptional citizens.<sup>9</sup> The educational system urged students to emulate the Romans’ personal virtues, but to beware not to adopt their political outlook. In this way, classical education was very limited. The *collèges* also limited the scope of the students’ exposure to the ancients by using only a select number of main sources for their information. The core of the classical curriculum from the 1750's to 1789 included a group of works by only five authors: Cicero, Livy, Plutarch, Sallust, and Tacitus. Parker notes that none of these writers lived during the golden days of the Roman Republic, and almost all were dissatisfied with their present.<sup>10</sup>

Cicero was the earliest of the writers taught in French schools. His writings were the works of a true Roman lawyer. His orations against Catiline and Antony demonstrate his strong dedication to the principles of the Republican constitution. Cicero was wary of the strong, opportunistic individual who tried to usurp too much power. Against Catiline he writes “while that enemy was in the city, we should never have freed the Republic from its perils in such peace, tranquility, and quiet.”<sup>11</sup>

Livy was a Roman historian who depicted the early days of the Republic in his first books. Of the Ancient Republic he writes:

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<sup>8</sup>Parker, 31.

<sup>9</sup>Brockliss, 156.

<sup>10</sup>Parker, 22.

<sup>11</sup>Cicero *In Catilinam*, Loeb Classical Library, 121.

no state was ever greater, none more righteous or richer in good examples, none ever was where avarice and luxury came into the social order so late, or where humble means and thrift were so highly esteemed and so long held in honor. For true it is that the less men's wealth was, the less was their greed. Of late, riches have brought in avarice, and excessive pleasures the longing to carry wantonness and licence to the point of ruin for oneself and of universal destruction.<sup>12</sup>

Livy's accounts idealize early Roman heroes such as the scrupulous Cincinnatus, who never lost his fondness for simple living, or Horatius Cocles, who defended the Tiber bridge.<sup>13</sup> The French *collèges* used his writings to influence each student's sense of private virtue.

The schools also exposed students to the works of Plutarch, Sallust, and Tacitus, which dealt with abstract virtues such as "liberty" and "civic virtue." Plutarch's *Lives* of famous Romans are moral biographies that idealize heroes such as Brutus, Cato, and the Gracchi. In Sallust's *The War with Catiline*, the author presents an account of Lucius Catiline, "that man of an evil and depraved nature,"<sup>14</sup> and his conspiratorial activities against Rome in 63 B.C. In doing so, Sallust compares the virtuous Roman past with his own depraved present, a technique that many French reformers would later adopt. Likewise, Tacitus, who lived in Imperial Rome, pitted the corruption of the present

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<sup>12</sup>Livy *Book I*, Loeb Classical Library, 7.

<sup>13</sup>Livy *Book II*, Loeb Classical Library, 15.

<sup>14</sup>Sallust *The War with Catiline*, Loeb Classical Library, 9.

against the liberty and virtue of the Republic. All of the authors wrote before 120 A.D., and yet they were already beginning to compare their society unfavorably with the Roman past. In their own way, these authors created the first Cult of Antiquity: an Ancient Cult of Antiquity that tended to idealize the history of its own empire. In reading the works of these five authors, the historian may come to a startling conclusion: hundreds of years before antiquity had collapsed, the Cult of Antiquity had already begun.

Overall, the schooling of the élite professionals in France had not changed for several decades. Robespierre's exposure to Latin and the Romans was virtually identical to that of Richelieu.<sup>15</sup> During the 1760's, however, there came an important change. For the first time, older students began to learn something about France's current history. This change came as a result of the introduction of history as an independent discipline.<sup>16</sup> In the decades before the Revolution, history had become the causal study of change. The study of ancient Rome became the study of a long-past history. Therefore, even if Robespierre encountered the same idealized, edited, and limited view of Rome as Richelieu, he should have been much more aware that the present could never reproduce the classical past.

In addition, the *collèges* taught future conservatives and reformers alike that

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<sup>15</sup>Brockliss, 178.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 134.

wholesale emulation of the Roman writers was a mistake. Daily attendance at the school's chapel was required, as was attendance at a weekly sermon.<sup>17</sup> Regardless of what the students privately believed going into the *collèges*, the schools inculcated them with a set of moral, political, and religious ideas that they were supposed to keep and nurture throughout their lives. Of course, the values imparted were very conservative and supportive of the *status quo*. Every French student, including Robespierre and Brissot, learned the importance of loyalty to his family, his Church, and the monarchical system.<sup>18</sup>

Measuring accurately the absolute effects of the *collèges*' indoctrination on the students is impossible, but overall, it seems to have been successful. Most of the liberal professional élite had a difficult time trying to erase the prejudices of their *collège* education, if they tried at all. The radical rationalism of the *philosophes* was often too much for a product of the French educational system to digest. In many instances, as graduates of the *collège* system, the *philosophes* may have even doubted themselves.<sup>19</sup> For most of the eighteenth century thinkers, therefore, the result was a sort of intellectual compromise between what they thought to be true and what the *collège* had taught them

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<sup>17</sup>Harvey Chisick, *The Limits of Reform in the Enlightenment: Attitudes toward the Education of the Lower Classes in Eighteenth-Century France* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), 132.

<sup>18</sup>Parker, 37.

<sup>19</sup>Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, vol. 1, *The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 144.

to be true. This eighteenth century “double think” gave birth to such beliefs as deism and limited, “enlightened monarchy.” The *philosophes* seemed to know the right answers, but could not always bring themselves to vocalize them.

## The Classics of the *Philosophes*



Because the *philosophes* could not completely reconcile their *ancien régime* lessons with their new ideas, because they could not organize a coherent “cult of reason” for their audience, and because the Church had such a firm grasp on the ideas of eighteenth century France, many scholars doubt that they had any direct, meaningful effect on the French mentality. This is unfortunate because many *philosophes* sought to offer an alternative view of Classical society: one that portrayed Republican Rome as a “Garden of Eden” from which humankind had fallen and never recovered. Like the teachers of the *collèges*, the *philosophes* emphasized the personal virtues of the Roman Republic’s heroes. Unlike the *collèges*, however, the *philosophes* also praised the Republic’s political institutions.<sup>20</sup> This new ideology produced notions about the relationship between the people and the sovereign that conflicted with the *collèges’* traditional doctrines.

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 165.



As products of the Enlightenment, the Parisian *philosophes* believed in man's constant self-improvement and eventual perfection. As products of the Age of Reason, the writers believed that man would attain this improvement and perfection only through scientific discovery and innovation. Although Isaac Newton's concept of a universe defined by laws originally applied only to the natural sciences, philosophers eventually extended this notion to the realm of political science.<sup>21</sup> It was in this regard that the *philosophes* began to formulate theories on the nature of man and the individual's relationship with society. For their models, they chose the lessons of Ancient Rome and Greece.

An important product of their philosophies was the eighteenth century ideal of "enlightened despotism," popularized by such rulers as Frederick II of Prussia, Catherine II of Russia, and Joseph II of Austria. In this form of government, a new "philosopher king" would ascend the throne. This modern king would be well versed in the natural and political sciences, would have an undying love for reason, and would rule his nation accordingly, initiating a new age of peace and progress.<sup>22</sup> Although this notion stemmed from their ideas, "enlightened despotism" was championed less by the *philosophes* than by rulers attempting to elevate their status and justify their quest for absolute power.

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<sup>21</sup>A. Owen Aldridge, *Voltaire and the Century of Light* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975), 76.

<sup>22</sup>Asher Horowitz, *Rousseau, Nature, and History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 112.

Enlightenment writers such as Rousseau, Montesquieu, Diderot and Voltaire each had their own concept of the relationship between society and the individual, and therefore had differing models for the best form of government. An examination of the *philosophes'* notions of the individual and society, with special emphasis on Rousseau and his *Du Contrat Social*, will illustrate the different eighteenth century interpretations of perfect government and their links to classical society.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* begins with an enthusiastic interpretation of Plutarch:

These interesting readings, the conversations they occasioned between my father and myself, formed this free and republican spirit, this indomitable and proud character, impatient with yoke or servitude, which has tormented me my whole life in situations least appropriate to giving it reign. Ceaselessly occupied with Rome and Athens, living so to say with their great men, myself born a citizen of a republic, and son of a father whose love of the *patrie* was his strongest passion, I was fired by his example; I believed myself a Greek or Roman; I became the character whose life I was reading: the recital of traits of constancy and intrepidity which had struck me rendered me glistening and my voice strong. One day as I recounted at the table the adventure of Scaevola, they were frightened to see me advance and hold my hand over a chafing dish to represent his action.<sup>23</sup>

As a key figure of the Enlightenment, Rousseau devoted much of his life to political writing and theory. His 1762 book, *Du Contrat Social*, is perhaps the work for which he is best known, but by no means does it stand alone. In fact, scholars regard the

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<sup>23</sup>Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, trans. Maurice Cranston (New York: Modern Library, 1945), 4.

work as a continuation of his earlier, lengthier book, *A Discourse on Inequality*. In the former work, Rousseau depicts his current society as one ruined by man's incompetent self-rule. Somewhere in history, he argues, man fell from social grace. In *Du Contrat Social*, Rousseau attempts to right that wrong. In the first chapter of this book he writes, "man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains."<sup>24</sup> With this, Rousseau establishes his main objective: to determine how man failed in the past, and how he might succeed again in the future. He proffers a solution in the form of an accord among men to create the sovereign, a "social contract," and thus explicitly defines the individual's relationship with society.<sup>25</sup>

Rousseau devotes much of *Du Contrat Social* to the example of the Roman Republic. In book four, he explores Roman elections, tribunes, dictators, and censors and concludes that it was the establishment of the tribunes and plebs that made the Republic "a true government and a real democracy."<sup>26</sup> Like the political theorist Thomas Hobbes, Rousseau begins his definition of the individual in society with an assumption of the "natural state," where laws and governments do not exist. In this state, the individual's life and liberty are under constant threat by both nature and his fellow

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<sup>24</sup>Jean-Jacques Rousseau *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin Books, 1968), 42.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

man.<sup>27</sup> When these combined threats create an obstacle too great for the human race to overcome as individuals, society results. In Book I of *Du Contrat Social*, Rousseau demonstrates that only a social pact can properly establish a working citizenry. He argues that no other foundation, neither the natural family, the right of the strongest, nor the institution of slavery, will suffice to provide a basis for the ideal society. Rousseau thus concludes “that we must always go back to an original covenant.”<sup>28</sup>

Having established the social pact as the only viable basis for society, Rousseau attempts to describe the nature of such an agreement. It is important to distinguish Rousseau’s social pact from his social contract. To enter a contract with their sovereign, men must first enter a contract with each other that allows them to function as a single unit acting under one unanimous decision. This, Rousseau explains, is the social *pact*. By describing such an agreement, Rousseau indicates the inherent problem of the idea of any compact wherein society compels the individual to forfeit certain rights for the common good:

‘How to find a form of association which will defend the person and goods of each member with the collective force of all and under which each individual, while uniting himself with the others, obeys no one but himself, and remains as free as before.’ This is the fundamental problem to which the social contract holds the solution.<sup>29</sup>

In effect, Rousseau attempts to find a medium that allows man to enjoy the intrinsic

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 48.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 58.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 50.

safety of a social pact while keeping his individual liberty. It is a need for this equilibrium that obliges men to reach another contract: the social contract. Achieving a balance between the individual and society was Rousseau's primary goal in creating the social contract.

The social contract as described by Rousseau results in a political system ruled by a sovereign. In the author's ideal society, the sovereign is a "collective being": the citizenry. Rousseau adds that it is "nothing other than the exercise of the general will."<sup>30</sup> He sees no other way to guarantee the safety of those within the contract. Even when compared with the progressive standards of his *philosophe* contemporaries, his model government is very democratic. In Rousseau's paradigm, there is no room for despotism, "enlightened" or otherwise. This will be an important point to remember as our discussion continues.

By entering into a contract that allows every citizen into the sovereignty, the individual actually stands to gain personal liberty. Although the individual is independent in pre-contractual nature, natural obstacles and a fear of potential rivals still bind him. He becomes liberated when he enters a social contract because he assures himself the equality and sovereignty that nature does not promise. Furthermore, Rousseau argues that by submitting to the General Will, even in instances when he disagrees, the individual assures himself a happier, freer existence.

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 69.

Rousseau writes, “we have seen that the legislative power belongs, and can only belong, to the people.”<sup>31</sup> Although the people as sovereign can express the General Will, Rousseau contends that the populace must establish a correlative executive power to administer that will. By establishing this executive power, Rousseau divides the government into “ordinary private citizens,” those who hold supreme legislative power, and “citizen magistrates,” those who have executive duties.<sup>32</sup> He classifies governments according to the ratio of citizens to magistrates: pure democracies have more magistrates than citizens, aristocracies have only a handful of magistrates, and monarchies have only one. The final result of his social contract, therefore, is a choice. To his question “what is the best form of government?” he responds, “in general, democratic government suits small states, aristocratic government suits states of intermediate size and monarchy suits large states.”<sup>33</sup> As supportive of a French monarchy as this may seem, Rousseau also instructs that “those who succeed in monarchies are often petty bunglers, petty rogues, petty intriguers.”<sup>34</sup> This is a sharp contrast to the political science taught in the *collèges*, which held that Rome’s Republic was the system populated by such terrible citizens.

For all of its definitiveness and finality, *Du Contrat Social* is but one of several theses written by Rousseau addressing the individual and society. In *A Discourse on*

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 101.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 110.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 111.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 132.

*Inequality*, a thesis written prior to *Du Contrat Social*, Rousseau attempted to discover the source of inequality among men, and in doing so depicted a flawed society that needed radical improvement. This earlier book introduces Rousseau's idea of an original social pact, as distinct from the social contract. Like Hobbes, Rousseau believed that men were essentially and originally individuals, and that society was a construct, not natural. In this way he establishes nature as the antithesis to culture. Rousseau then attempts to recreate the story of human evolution and the downfall of human equality and liberties.

In both *Discourse on Inequality* and *Du Contrat Social*, Rousseau presents his main thesis on the individual's relationship with society. Although society is currently flawed, it can greatly improve itself by entering into a new social contract in which the individual exchanges his natural liberties for improved civic and moral liberties. Rousseau actually bases his "new concept" of a society of civic virtue upon two republics, separated by many miles and many centuries, but both at the forefront of the eighteenth century philosopher's mind: ancient Rome and modern Geneva.

Like many *philosophes*, Rousseau learned as a young pupil to look to ancient Greece and Rome for inspiration. His teachers and parents taught him the glory and splendor of the ancients, and instilled in him a respect for the writings of men like Plutarch and Livy.<sup>35</sup> Rousseau drew upon his knowledge and respect of classical society

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<sup>35</sup>Horowitz, 103.

to create an improved, modern government. From the classics he derived the notion that individual freedom is not opposite to government rule. Instead, by entering into a new social contract, the individual gains the freedom to be a citizen and participate in the political process, a liberty far more valuable to Rousseau than the God-given liberties of the natural state. Nevertheless, he only proposes democratic *legislation* for mankind's self-rule. Like the Roman Republicans, Rousseau believes that the administrative government should be an elected aristocracy: government by the best. A democratic administration would prove infeasible.

Although many philosophers agreed with Rousseau's assertion that classical government was the best for mankind, few agreed that mankind could ever recreate such a government, especially in eighteenth century France. Because America had not yet won her independence, Rousseau looked elsewhere for a modern-day Sparta, and found it in his native Republic of Geneva. Rousseau demonstrates his love for the *modern* republican ideal in the dedication of his *A Discourse on Inequality*. In this dedication, he claims that:

“equality and inequality, happily combined in that Republic, are balanced in the manner that is most in conformity with natural law, and most favourable to society, to the maintenance of government and to the happiness of individuals.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality*, trans. Maurice Cranston (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 1.



Sadly, Rousseau's ideal of ancient "civic virtue" was never actually realized in Geneva. Although the city strived to achieve the balance so important to Rousseau's political ideology, it failed to attain that balance. Nevertheless, the dedication is useful as an indication of what he thought Geneva to be, and what he hoped France could become: a balanced nation based upon ancient civic virtues.

Intellectual history is often difficult to analyze because over the course of their careers, philosophers and theorists tend to contradict themselves or even change their philosophies. Although he had little effect on later revolutionary culture, a study of the *philosophes* would be incomplete without discussion of the modernist philosophies of Denis Diderot. Diderot is particularly difficult to grasp because he contradicts and even argues with himself over the course of a single work. In a style reminiscent of ancient Socratic dialogues, Diderot addresses issues from a host of perspectives, never fully disclosing which one (if any) is his. In *Rameau's Nephew* and *D'Alembert's Dream*, Diderot attempts to establish his own balance of the individual and society, but does so without coming to any conclusive decision.<sup>37</sup>

The reader can assume, however, that Diderot differed from Rousseau in his belief that man is innately a social creature. This position leads to the conclusion that there is no need for man to check himself with a social contract. Also, this belief leads to the logical idea that society's purpose is the improvement and eventual perfection of

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<sup>37</sup>Denis Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, trans. Leonard Tancock (London: Penguin Books, 1966), 91.

mankind. Diderot's position as the editor of the *Encyclopédie* also greatly affected his personal philosophy. As a strict believer in Newtonian and Baconian science, Diderot wrestled with problems of the individual's responsibility to society in a strictly determinist universe. In Newton's "clockwork universe," a scientific law could predict the movement of every particle, and earlier movements of matter necessitate all events. If this premise is true, future events are irreversibly established, and are therefore predetermined. In this universe, then, a society cannot hold an individual morally responsible for his actions.

Diderot attempts to add morals to Newtonian science by explaining that although men's actions are predetermined, they are driven by an overwhelming desire to benefit the self. The ideas of morality and virtue, therefore, are merely self-preservative societal constructs. Society designs these ideas to make those actions with undesirable effects for society (e.g., homicides, breaches of contract) have undesirable effects for the individual. Diderot proposes a system of rewards and punishments as "methods of correcting the modifiable person we call evil and encouraging the one we call good."<sup>38</sup> Diderot's faith in the individual's innate sociability and his attachment to the world of natural sciences triggered his belief that man will improve himself only through reason and advancement of knowledge and technology. This avid reader and supporter of Bacon and Newton wrote that process, progress and utility were directly linked, thus

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 218.

contradicting Rousseau's assertion that the advancement of arts and sciences is harmful to mankind. These written beliefs lead the reader to assume that Diderot supported the idea of a strong, centralized, scientifically oriented government.

Rousseau and Diderot were not the only *philosophes* to offer their views on the individual and society during the Enlightenment. They were, in fact, not even the first. That distinction most likely belongs to Charles-Louis de Secondat, better known as the Baron de Montesquieu. Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* addresses various political and philosophical issues, serving as an introduction not only to the author's career, but to the literature of the Age of Reason. In this work the reader can see a basic view of man's nature more similar to Diderot's than Rousseau's. Nevertheless, we can compare Montesquieu with both of the later *philosophes*. The book marks the beginnings of a political philosophy that culminated in his masterpiece *On the Nature of Laws* and in the political idea for which scholars know him best, the separation of powers in government. In *Persian Letters*, the Troglodyte story best demonstrates the author's views on man and society.

Montesquieu's Troglodyte fable serves to establish a virtuous republic as the ideal form of government, and is therefore reflective of the writer's early political philosophy. In the story, Montesquieu first explains that absolute monarchy is inefficient and unfeasible. Usbek describes a king who attempts to reform the

Troglodytes' "natural wickedness" by establishing a harsh government.<sup>39</sup> The Troglodytes soon revolt against their king, kill the entire royal family, and establish a government of ministers. When those ministers fail to meet the Troglodyte's expectations, they too are killed.

As much as he abhors despotism, Montesquieu realizes that its abolition does not necessarily lead to justice. In his ideal society, the virtuous individual is the most important component. When a society rids itself of tyranny, Montesquieu argues, they must take care not to replace it with something even worse. As the fable unfolds, Montesquieu finally presents the specifics of his early political ideal. In the tale of the new Troglodytes he describes a self-governed society based upon morality and ruled by virtue. This Utopian model is populated by "happy Troglodytes" who "understand what justice is," "love virtue," and believe "that the individual's self-interest is always to be found in the common interest."<sup>40</sup>

Montesquieu's model citizenry regards itself as a single family guided by virtue. This society's self-image, he posits, empowers it to revere its gods, forgive its criminals, respect its relatives, and fight valiantly to protect itself. This closely resembles Rousseau's governmental model, in which society is treated as a single individual, driven by a "collective will." In these models, society adopts the characteristics of the single

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<sup>39</sup>Montesquieu, *Persian Letters* trans. C.J. Betts (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 53.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 57.

person by uniting each individual under rule of majority. In early eighteenth century France, this was a revolutionary concept of the individual and society.

Like Rousseau, Montesquieu's life experiences eventually forced him to reconsider the plausibility of a pure democracy. Whereas Rousseau attempted a compromise with his "elected aristocracy" notion, Montesquieu abandoned the entire notion of pure democracy as a viable option for humans. Like Rousseau, he began to look elsewhere for model societies. He found his society not in history books or over the Alps, but across "la manche," in England.

Disillusioned by his own society, as evidenced by his scathing indictments in *Persian Letters*, Montesquieu visited England later in his life, eventually adopting some of her culture, her language, and most important, her political ideals.<sup>41</sup> He saw that England was not entirely perfect, but he nevertheless looked to import the nation's religious toleration and civil liberties to his native France. The best way to do this, he thought, was to adopt the English system of separation of powers through a legitimate constitutional parliamentary system.<sup>42</sup> Montesquieu sided with Diderot in believing in man as social by nature, not individualistic. Montesquieu's individual does not need to enter a contract to create society, it is in his nature to create society.

The *philosophe* Voltaire had an entirely different concept of the relationship

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<sup>41</sup>Judith N. Shklar, *Montesquieu* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 98.

<sup>42</sup>Montesquieu, 45.

between the individual and society, but nevertheless saw in England a model society worthy of France's attention and emulation. Unlike Montesquieu, Voltaire saw man as essentially individualistic, and born with God-given rights. He also did not believe that the solution to France's problems lay in an adopted system of separation of powers. Nevertheless, he appreciated England's religious toleration and respect for the individual's rights.

Like Diderot, Voltaire's admiration for the natural scientists and his close connection with the self-described "enlightened despots" of the day largely shaped his notion of government. In his classic attack on Leibniz's Optimism, entitled *Candide*, Voltaire does not directly address the issues of man and society. Instead, the hero Candide, through several life experiences, learns that life is for living, not for debate. Metaphysical discussions about things that men cannot change are a waste of time. Life can be evil and unfair, but it can also be good. Voltaire's ultimate solution is to "work without arguing. That is the only way to make life bearable."<sup>43</sup> In this system, therefore, each person finds their position in society and attempts to keep it. There is little interaction between the individual and society.

Although their views of the nature of man and the individual in society differed greatly, the *philosophes* unanimously agreed that the "enlightened despotism" of Catherine II, Joseph II, and Frederick II was insufficient. Nevertheless, these writers

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<sup>43</sup>Voltaire, *Candide*, trans. John Butt (London: Penguin Books, 1947), 144.

needed financial support for their endeavors, and they constantly corresponded with the great leaders of eighteenth century Europe: asking for money, promising manuscripts, and offering advice (often unsolicited). It is not surprising, then, to learn that the philosophies expounded by the books of these men directly reflect Enlightenment society.

Clearly, Rousseau did not support the idea of an “enlightened despotism.” His belief that man is individualistic by nature led to his philosophies concerning the establishment of a social pact long ago, and the need to establish an improved contract in the near future: one based upon republican ideals. In Rousseau’s ideal society, legislation is purely democratic and administration is an elected aristocracy. In no way can we construe this as supportive of a single, enlightened despot.

The cultist rhetoric of the Revolution portrays Rousseau as a secular prophet. He attempted to define the ideal government, and hoped that his writings would one day reflect society. When revolutionaries of the late eighteenth century put his ideas to practice, however, his model crumbled. We can attribute this to the flaws in Rousseau’s basic philosophy. Robespierre and his cohorts expected the individual of Rousseau’s model to submit passively to a conflicting decision of the General Will. Rousseau argues that the minority will concede to the majority because he will agree that the majority, by definition, must have a clearer conception of what is right.<sup>44</sup> In truth, the

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<sup>44</sup>Rousseau, 122.

dissident submits to the law only because the alternative separation from society appeals to him less than the prospect of following a bad law. The individual would rather concede the occasional point of law than exile himself from the community and have the freedom to make his own rules. On paper, the philosopher's utopian ideas seemed to work, and he created his model with good intentions. In the legislative assemblies of Europe, however, they proved to be prone to misinterpretation and insufficiently vague. The resulting society was worse than the one Rousseau had set out to improve.

Although they agree upon man's need for technological advancement, the other three *philosophes* actually base their ideas upon different views of the nature of man. Voltaire sides with Rousseau in his belief that man is essentially an individualistic animal that must make artificial constructs to form society. Nevertheless, he does not disguise his unequivocal admiration for the natural sciences, an affinity that would affect his philosophy more than his position on man's natural solitude. Diderot and Montesquieu agree that man is innately a social creature, that Hobbes' "natural state" could never really exist, and that man's advancement depends upon scientific and technological breakthroughs.<sup>45</sup>

Rousseau's theses were not the only works of the Enlightenment that later politicians used and reinterpreted. Montesquieu, Diderot and Voltaire maintained that culture, society, and science were necessary components for the perfection of man,

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<sup>45</sup>Shklar, 87.



placing them directly against Rousseau's philosophy. Like Rousseau's model society, however, their ideas became seriously corrupted when put to practice in the eighteenth century. It was their love of science, coupled with their support for a strong, centralized, knowledgeable government that most directly gave rise to the notion of "enlightened despotism."

Frederick II of Prussia was the first major ruler to adopt the idea of an "enlightened despot."<sup>46</sup> His frequent communication with Voltaire allowed him to associate himself with France and the *philosophe* ideals. With pressure from Voltaire and other lesser *philosophes*, Frederick II initiated reform in his native country, starting with an overhaul of Prussia's archaic criminal code. Later in his reign, he welcomed reforms in religious toleration and torture.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, the visiting Voltaire was critical of what he saw as a thin veneer of enlightened reform covering a mostly militaristic nation. Ultimately, Voltaire did not sanction the reform efforts of Frederick II, and thus did not support the Prussian ideal of an "enlightened despot."

In Austria, Joseph II, son of the great Maria Theresa, attempted his version of an enlightened leadership. He admired the French *philosophes* and looked to them for inspiration as they looked to the English intellectual colossi Newton and Locke. Nevertheless, the overall success of his enlightened reform efforts was dismal. His

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<sup>46</sup>Aldridge, 136.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 144.

attempt to make monks into civic teachers failed when the Catholic Church resisted, the nobility thwarted his plan to reform the peasant tax system, and his doctrine of toleration had only limited success.<sup>48</sup> In sum, the ideal centralized society of the *philosophes'* theories was difficult to put into practice in a nation of such varied cultures, languages, and social backgrounds.

Finally, Catherine II attempted to use “enlightened despotism” to extend her glory and justify her rule. She enjoyed reading the theses of the *philosophes*, and even inherited Diderot’s entire library upon his death in 1784.<sup>49</sup> She established a work group to revise and approve her administration’s “enlightened manifesto.” Nevertheless, like Frederick II, her love for French rhetoric was simply a veil of liberal thought behind which she could hide her absolutist tendencies. She used the work group to appear enlightened and gain leverage against the Russian nobility. In a manner foreshadowing the revolutionaries’ use of the Cult of Antiquity, she portrayed herself as an “enlightened despot” to protect her administration from the threat of *coups d’etat*.

The Parisian philosophers of the Enlightenment each had a different notion of the nature of man and the relationship between society and the individual. These notions combined with classical models to influence their ideas for the creation of a perfect society. Yet, none of the Enlightenment philosophers advised a radical imitation of the

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 215.

<sup>49</sup>Diderot, 17.

ancients.<sup>50</sup> Parker explains, “not even Rousseau abandoned his eighteenth-century breeches for a classical toga.”<sup>51</sup> Each *philosophe* attempted to improve his society in some way, and to some extent, each did. Problems arose, however, when monarchs and revolutionaries applied the ideas of these philosophers’ books to actual society. Today, as in the eighteenth century, we can use the works of the *philosophes* for self-improvement and consideration. If we use these ideas out of context, however, or misinterpret them, they no longer achieve the author’s purpose. When considering the philosophies of the Enlightenment, the reader must employ moderation, one of the key tenets of the age. If he does not employ moderation, the message of the *philosophes* is corrupted and, ultimately, lost.

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<sup>50</sup>Jacques Solé, *Questions of the French Revolution*, trans. Shelley Temchin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 18.

<sup>51</sup>Parker, 35.

CHAPTER 2  
MORNING IN EDEN:  
PRE-REVOLUTION AND THE *PHILOSOPHES*

To understand the connection between the Enlightenment and the Cult of Antiquity, one must study two distinct eighteenth century intellectual cultures: one of the conservatives and one of the revolutionaries. As the first chapter has explained, the ideological gap between these two groups grew when leaders applied theory to real politics. Unlike Americans, the French did not readily embrace the Enlightenment. The *philosophes*, however, did succeed in introducing their ideas to an élite group of liberal professionals and noblemen. Armed with their ideas, these revolutionaries would set out to change the course of history in France and throughout the world. The intent of this chapter is twofold. First, we will examine the reasons for France's rejection of the *philosophes'* ideas. In doing so, we will also determine the *philosophes'* ultimate legacy to the Cult of Antiquity by discussing their revival and reinterpretation among the pre-revolutionaries.

## The Unheard Voice of Reason



In a 1910 article entitled “Les Enseignements Des Bibliothèques Privées,” Daniel Mornet first posed the question “What did the French read during the eighteenth century?”<sup>1</sup> Although the question seems simple, it raises issues about revolutions and intellectual history that remain unresolved. Several authors have attempted to answer this question, including Mornet himself in his general work *The Intellectual Origins of the*

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<sup>1</sup>Daniel Mornet, “Les Enseignements des bibliothèques privées (1750-1780),” *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* XVII (1910): 449-492; trans. Robert Darnton in *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), xvii.

*French Revolution*, and more recently, Roger Chartier in *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* and Robert Darnton in *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*. The latter book provides the most adequate answers; Darnton's combination of new data, old analysis, and twenty-five years of research is the most accurate appraisal of what the French read and learned. Nevertheless, the author cautions that the book "is meant to open up new questions while chasing after the old."<sup>2</sup> He explains that a simple bestseller list is not enough to explain the revolutionary set of ideals. Instead, historians must consider the sources and ramifications of pre-revolutionary knowledge.

What, then, did the French read during the eighteenth century? According to Darnton and Donald Sutherland, the French philosophers were not high on the list. The *philosophes'* ideas addressed fundamental problems that most French citizens did not care to ponder. Before the writers earnestly began their attempts to diffuse their information, therefore, they had already erred. These thinkers had no political agenda and no true interest in maintaining the *ancien régime's status quo*. In addition, their works contradicted the religious mentality of France at the time.<sup>3</sup> For these reasons, the *philosophes* failed to bring the Enlightenment to the French citizenry. Some historians believe that even if they had done so, many of their ideas were too innocuous to have directly sparked revolution. In texts such as Mably's *Les entriens de Phocion*, Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* and Rousseau's *Du contrat social, Emile*, and

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<sup>2</sup>Darnton, xxiii.

<sup>3</sup>Donald Sutherland, *France 1789-1815* (New York: Oxford University Press), 19.

*Confessions*, the *philosophes* praised the virtues of the Republican heroes as well as its political institutions.<sup>4</sup> Writers such as Rousseau and Diderot made no attempt to discern between the public and private lives of Roman heroes. For the most part, however, their praises fell on deaf ears. This surprising paradox led Frederick II of Prussia to declare that “France, with all its touted philosophers, is one of the most superstitious and least advanced nations in Europe.”<sup>5</sup>

The remarks of this “enlightened monarch” are astonishing because they contradict the popular belief, held by intellectual historians from de Tocqueville to Mathiez<sup>6</sup>, that the Enlightenment was the direct source of a popular upheaval that led to the Revolution. Perhaps even more astonishing is that Frederick II is probably correct. In *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of the French Revolution*, Robert Darnton documents the sales records of illegal books in the eighteenth century. He offers strong evidence that the people of France preferred works of fiction and scandalous pornography to the dry theses of the philosophers:<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Harold T. Parker, *The Cult of Antiquity and the French Revolutionaries* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1937), 38.

<sup>5</sup>Jacques Solé, *Questions of the French Revolution*, trans. Shelley Temchin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 15.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>7</sup>Chart is reprinted from Darnton, 69.

General Pattern of Demand		
CATEGORY	TITLES (#)	TITLES(%)
RELIGION		
a.Treatises	45	9.8
b.Satire, Polemics	81	17.7
c.Irreligious Pornography	18	3.9
PHILOSOPHY		
a.Treatises	31	6.8
b.Collected Works	28	6.1
c.Satire, Polemics	9	2.0
d.General Social Criticism	33	7.2
POLITICS		
a.Treatises	20	4.4
b.Topical Works	50	10.9
c.Libels, Court Satire	45	9.8
d. <i>Chroniques scandaleuses</i>	17	3.7
SEX	64	14.0
OTHER		
a.Occultism	2	0.4
b.Freemasonry	6	1.3
UNCLASSIFIED	8	1.8

Most of the best-selling titles of the eighteenth century have since been forgotten.

Indeed, the most popular book of the century was *The Guiding Angel*,<sup>8</sup> a book that Sutherland describes as a “justly forgotten but endlessly reprinted book of devotions.”<sup>9</sup> Darnton finds that the French people hardly read at all the books that historians generally associate with the Enlightenment:

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<sup>8</sup>Darnton, 34.

<sup>9</sup>Sutherland, 35.



Only once did the [Société-typographique de Neuchatel] receive an order for the *Contrat Social*-from a peddler named Planquais, who wanted four copies. So the *Contrat Social* did not figure among the top four hundred ordered from the STN. It did not appear in any of the clandestine catalogues of the other publishers, although the STN offered it in its own catalogue of *livres philosophiques*; and it did not get seized in any of the police raids. . . . In short, Mornet was probably correct in claiming that Rousseau's treatise did not circulate widely in France before the Revolution.<sup>10</sup>

In provincial culture, the favorite books were those on religious, historical, or professional subjects. When they purchased books for recreation, the popular classes kept their disdain for political theses and preferred to read about the supernatural, the amazing, or the fantastic.<sup>11</sup> Sutherland notes that the sharp increase in literacy rates during the eighteenth century, particularly in women and southerners, did nothing to change what the French read.<sup>12</sup> Even among the minority capable of absorbing the ideals of the *philosophes*, professional, religious, and historical issues remained the major literary preoccupations.

The *philosophes* also had to contend with the institutions of Christianity, which had a firm, if slipping, grasp on the mind set of the average Frenchman. Before 1789, Catholicism still enjoyed a great deal of power over the bourgeois and lower classes. Paying little heed to the Age of Reason, French people adhered to the catechism and

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<sup>10</sup>Darnton, 67.

<sup>11</sup>Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1991), 79.

<sup>12</sup>Sutherland, 35.

respected the traditions of lineage and the *ancien régime*.<sup>13</sup> Religious ceremonies and processions were still the most popular entertainments in France. They served a dual purpose by fostering social solidarity under the guiding hand of the Christian Church. Although the Enlightenment thinkers fought desperately against religion and its festivals, the faith of the bourgeois and popular classes remained intact. Historians certainly find rifts in eighteenth-century French Catholicism, but fail to see any fundamental crisis.<sup>14</sup> The clergy displayed a remarkable unity and militancy in combating the Enlightenment's effects. In France, at least until the 1790's, its efforts paid off.

Until the revolution, French Catholicism consistently won the ideological battle against the *philosophes*. As advocates of reason, the *philosophes* and their pre-revolutionary supporters mocked the superstitious nature of the people, another position that would cost them approval. Although the *philosophes* only intended to criticize the monarchy with their satires and discourses, they also assaulted the views of the France as a whole.<sup>15</sup> They became increasingly unpopular as they constantly scorned the legends, folklore, and religion that comprised the country's popular culture. By the 1760's the philosophers and their salon supporters became an élite minority that pitted reason against

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<sup>13</sup>Harvey Chisick, *The Limits of Reform in the Enlightenment: Attitudes of the Lower Classes in Eighteenth Century France* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), 159.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 166.

<sup>15</sup>Sutherland, 27.

popular superstitions that they ridiculed but could not destroy.<sup>16</sup>

The *cahiers* of 1789 depict a culturally homogenous France that was dismissive of Enlightenment ideals.<sup>17</sup> French citizens still preferred traditional institutions to the new rationalism for their political inspiration. The events of the summer of 1789 did little to change the country's ideology. Overall, the French people were averse to radicalism and highly conservative. Many found the Revolution difficult to accept, and never fully agreed with their would-be representatives. The result, therefore, was a revolution in which the leaders were ideologically separated from the people for whom they sought reform.<sup>18</sup> Such a revolution would prove to be prolonged, difficult and deadly.

## The *Philosophes* and the Early Revolutionaries



Although the *philosophes* were generally either unknown or unaccepted in France, they found an influential patronage in the salon society of the liberal nobility. These members of the wealthy, cultivated élite provided the writers with money, correspondence, criticism, entertainment, and a proper forum for their ideas: the salon houses of Paris. In *les provinces*, the parliamentary magistrates supported the works of

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<sup>16</sup>Mornet, *La Pensée française au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: XXX, 1969), 113.

<sup>17</sup>Sutherland, 34.

<sup>18</sup>Chisick, 166.

the Enlightenment through the academies that they controlled.<sup>19</sup> Nobles made Diderot's very expensive *Encyclopédie* popular upon its first printing.<sup>20</sup> This is not surprising when one considers that many nobles, including D'Alembert and Jaucourt, contributed articles to the enormous work.<sup>21</sup> The Enlightenment's French supporters were few in number, but nearly all of them had money and enthusiasm for the cause. Because these people would eventually be influential in the winter of 1788-89 and in the Estates-General, it is important to recognize the interpretation of ancient society that they gleaned from the *philosophes*.

The Enlightenment interpretation of the Greco-Roman past was both pessimistic and didactic. As stated in Chapter One, the Enlightenment thinkers saw the classical past as a Garden of Eden from which mankind had fallen. In this view, man could never return to his former greatness, but could still use the past to improve his present political and personal situation. Like the *collèges*, Parisian philosophers instructed readers to emulate the personal traits of the ancients: most notably, poverty, austerity, courage, and frugality.<sup>22</sup> *Philosophes* went farther, however, when they specifically lamented the lack

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<sup>19</sup>Sutherland, 35.

<sup>20</sup>Chisick, 63.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, vol. 2, *The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1966), 37.

of liberty, equality, and virtue in modern society.<sup>23</sup> The histories of Montesquieu and Rousseau taught that man fell from his secular “Eden” when his society’s political virtue crumbled. This political virtue decayed with the introduction of extravagance and wealth, and the subsequent decline of personal morality. The *philosophes* conveyed their views to their salon supporters: men like “M. Servan” who wrote of ancient times:

Lovely Athens charms my senses; but virtuous Sparta touches my soul. Age of the fine arts, brilliant days of Augustus and of Vergil, you are surpassed by those days of liberty and of virtue, by that sacred age of Regulus, of Camillus, and of Scipio. . . . If I could have seen Athens and Rome in their days of glory, I would not have visited first of all the Capitol or the Jupiter of Phidias, but the home of Aristides and of Cato. There, in those simple sanctuaries of virtue, with their children about them, I would have desired to look upon these men so virtuous and so great.<sup>24</sup>

The *philosophes* and their supporters believed republics like those in Rome and Greece could only survive in nations that were similarly “small and poor” and thus could never be emulated in the eighteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Their notions about man’s nature prevented them from foreseeing a virtuous, republican future for France. As much as they may have supported that idea, most *philosophes* agreed with Montesquieu that France, being a vast and opulent nation, could never have a system other than a monarchy. In the 1760's and 1770's, therefore, many liberal élites learned (and believed)

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<sup>23</sup>Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (London: University of California Press, 1984), 43.

<sup>24</sup>Parker, 62.

<sup>25</sup>Gay, 44.

that radical emulation of the Greek and Roman Republics was impossible.<sup>26</sup>

This view of antiquity may have done more than the conservative teachings of the *collèges* to discourage revolution. Because would-be revolutionaries truly believed that any attempt to republicanize France radically would inevitably end in failure, they focused their efforts on reform from within the monarchical system. Future revolutionaries such as Brissot, Condorcet, and Marat adopted moderate philosophies during this period. They thought that, unfortunately, no reformatory statute or institution could restore France to the Garden of Eden.<sup>27</sup>



Until the last two decades of the eighteenth century, at least, the *philosophes'* message was lost. They were relentless in their efforts to modernize the world, but never seriously considered revolution. Parker writes that the *philosophes* did not view the classical age as revolutionaries. Antiquity was not a Heavenly City toward which France was progressing. Rather, the models of Greece and Rome resembled the Garden of Eden, a distant past to regret and view as the standard of excellence.<sup>28</sup> In various works, Mably, Diderot, Montesquieu and Rousseau all maintained that France's size and wealth would

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<sup>26</sup>Carol Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue: The Language of Politics in the French Revolution* (Ithaca, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 149.

<sup>27</sup>Chartier, 155.

<sup>28</sup>Parker, 37.

preclude her from ever becoming a republic. The *philosophes'* ideas alone, therefore, could not serve as ideological catalysts for revolution. To the few people who read their essays, their notions actually served as dampeners of the revolutionary spirit. Events across the Atlantic Ocean, however, would render these notions obsolete. A discussion of Enlightenment, classical, and revolutionary ideals in the eighteenth century would be incomplete, even negligent, without mention of the American colonies. The third chapter of the thesis, therefore, will depart from the intellectual warfare between the *philosophes* and the *ancien régime* to explore the American War for Independence and the interpretations of Enlightenment and Classical ideals that it produced.

CHAPTER 3  
A RISING IN THE WEST:  
REVOLUTION IN AMERICA



Initially, the arguments of the *philosophes* went unnoticed or unappreciated in France. Although the writers criticized the politics of the *ancien régime*, they did so indirectly. The *philosophes* often veiled their appraisals behind allegory or analyses of distant countries, and offered few models of improvement that the French felt they could use. In contrast, the colonists in America repeatedly sought inspiration from the classics as interpreted by the Enlightenment. In *The Enlightenment in America*, Henry F. May describes three distinct categories of the eighteenth century Enlightenment: the Moderate Enlightenment, the Skeptical Enlightenment, and the Revolutionary Enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> His book suggests that the Skeptical Enlightenment of the Scots and *philosophes* came to America where the colonists transformed it into the Revolutionary Enlightenment. This Revolutionary Enlightenment was among the chief ideological causes of the French Revolution. Without the American model, perhaps, a European revolution during the Age of Reason would have been impossible. This chapter will explore the American Revolution as a conduit through which European Enlightenment ideals transformed into European Revolutionary ideals. Specifically, it will concentrate on colonial neo-classicism as the ideological precursor to the French Cult of Antiquity.

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<sup>1</sup>Henry May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 24.

## The American Education



Even as eighteenth century Americans strove to establish their own intellectual identity, they could not completely divorce themselves from the European cultures from which they departed. The most influential of these European societies was Britain, although it is unclear which part of Britain had the greatest effect. Many historians, including Henry May, posit that England was America's greatest ideological and intellectual contributor.<sup>2</sup> In his book, May describes the English "Moderate Enlightenment," in which scholars tempered a belief in nature's scientific patterns with an ardent Christian faith. These English scientists and philosophers attempted to reach a compromise between two bitter ideological enemies: science and religion. While the thinkers of England's Moderate Enlightenment attempted a virtually impossible compromise, their Scottish counterparts replaced them as the greatest influence upon American higher education. America's adoption of the Scottish education system would set her apart from nations such as France that attempted to maintain the *status quo* through indoctrination. Tradition or conservatism did not inhibit the colonists' educations. Thus, American revolutionaries did not suffer from the "double-think" pessimism that afflicted the *philosophes* and pre-revolutionaries. Americans saw the

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<sup>2</sup>May, 24.

classical age as a Heavenly City, to borrow Carl Becker's term,<sup>3</sup> which gave them the ideological freedom to pursue more radical reform and emulation of Greece and Rome.

In the early eighteenth century, England was in no position to serve as a model of higher education. Oxford University was suffering from misdirection and moral decay. Adam Smith, one of the Scottish Enlightenment's greatest thinkers, attended Oxford during the late 1720's. During his stay, he wrote that "the greater part of the public professors have, for these many years, given up altogether the pretence of teaching."<sup>4</sup> Edward Gibbon, who spent fourteen unprofitable months at Magdalen, described the Fellows as "easy men who supinely enjoyed the gifts of the founder. . . . Their conversation stagnated in a round of college business, Tory politics, and personal anecdotes of scandal."<sup>5</sup>

Colonial colleges, therefore, became innovative by default. They had very little use for the English schools as precedents. Oxford and Cambridge attempted to rise to the challenge of eighteenth century education. Their medieval organization and prevailing

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<sup>3</sup>Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932), 1. In this thesis, Becker posits that the *philosophes* and their supporters around the world were not nearly the proponents of the Age of Reason that historians make them out to be. His thesis has little to do with America specifically, but this reader believes his use of Saint Augustine's "Heavenly City" is appropriate for this discussion. In his study, Becker summons and encourages new analyses of all eighteenth century aspects. In sum, Becker does not focus on America in his hypothesis, but his writings suggest that someone should. Of course, this is not to suggest that this will be the best or the first of such applications of Becker's thesis to colonial America.

<sup>4</sup>Richard P. Heitzenrater, *John Wesley as Seen by Contemporaries and Biographers* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 112.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

sense of academic apathy, however, stifled their efforts to improve.<sup>6</sup> Also, because the schools were Anglican, few early Americans seriously looked to them as models. Instead, colonists began to develop their own educational theories and to look to more innovative sources for academic inspiration, such as English Dissenting academies and, most important, Scottish universities.<sup>7</sup>

In England, most scientists and philosophers of the Enlightenment wrote and researched out of various academic societies and associations, choosing not to affiliate themselves with Cambridge or Oxford.<sup>8</sup> Scottish universities, by contrast, became immersed in the new scientific culture. Institutions such as St. Andrews, Glasgow, and Edinburgh quickly became integral parts of the Enlightenment, both at home and abroad. Nearly every major figure of the Scottish Enlightenment worked through university appointment.<sup>9</sup>

Scottish universities had an important role in world education as the highest parts of a system that attempted to teach children of all societal classes.<sup>10</sup> The universities' low tuition allowed almost anyone who had academic ability to attend. The schools,

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 114.

<sup>7</sup>May, 33.

<sup>8</sup>Roy Porter, "Medical Lecturing in Georgian London," *British Journal for the History of Science* 28 (March 1995): 92.

<sup>9</sup>Douglas Sloan, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the American College Ideal* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1971), 14.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 15.

therefore, supplied the nation's leaders by teaching lower-class young men to become professionals and clergymen. Despite pleas to do so from Methodists and Radicals, England would not fully adopt this education strategy until the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup>

Early Americans easily recognized the value of the Scottish education system. Benjamin Franklin learned of electricity's properties from the Scotsman Adam Spencer, an Edinburgh medical school graduate. Franklin would go on to receive an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from St. Andrews University in recognition of his electrical experiments.<sup>12</sup> Of collegiate studies in Scotland, Franklin wrote "[one has] great many advantages in going to study at Edinburgh at this time where there happen to be collected a set of as truly great men, Professors of the Several Branches of Knowledge, as have ever appeared in any age or country."<sup>13</sup> Truly, this was the educational system that the colonies sought to emulate.

Franklin shared his views on Scottish education with most of the thousands of Scottish and Scotch-Irish New World immigrants. All told, as many as four hundred thousand people may have emigrated to America from Scotland and Ulster during the eighteenth century.<sup>14</sup> These people found the western frontiers of Pennsylvania, Virginia,

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<sup>11</sup>Harold Silver, *English Education and the Radicals* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 58.

<sup>12</sup>J. Bennett Nolan, *Benjamin Franklin in Scotland and Ireland* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1938), 15.

<sup>13</sup>Sloan, 2.

<sup>14</sup>May, 135.

and the Carolinas to be more hospitable than the established communities of New York and New England. Although many Scottish immigrants were poor, illiterate farmers, they supported their ministers. These ministers usually held degrees from Scottish universities and typically embodied the Presbyterian concern for education.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, several smaller academies, usually no more than very good grammar schools, started to train young men in divinity studies or the professions. The Scottish Enlightenment had truly made its way to the colonies. One such academy, the so-called Log College, served as a model for the fledgling College of New Jersey, later renamed Princeton University.<sup>16</sup> The college's sixth president, perhaps more than any other man, was responsible for America's adoption of Enlightenment educational ideals. His name was John Witherspoon. A Scotsman by birth, a graduate from the University of Edinburgh, and a leading minister in the Church of Scotland, Witherspoon was well prepared to turn his college into an institute of Scottish learning and a beacon for smaller Presbyterian academies, especially those in Virginia. May describes him as "the most effective college president of the eighteenth century."<sup>17</sup>

Witherspoon's academic reforms came even before his presidential inauguration. Determined to broaden Princeton's curriculum and raise its academic standards, he

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<sup>15</sup>Sloan, 37.

<sup>16</sup>Donald G. Tewksbury, *The Founding of America's Collèges and Universities* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 59.

<sup>17</sup>May, 19.

actively arranged for the purchase of more than five hundred volumes before he left Scotland for New Jersey, including works by Rousseau, Hume, Hutcheson, Ferguson, Smith and Kames. Once in America, Witherspoon immediately bought the famous “Rittenhouse orrery” planetarium and announced that he intended to maintain the highest entrance requirements for entering freshmen.<sup>18</sup>

Witherspoon’s reforms were uniquely Enlightened. He was proud of his knowledge of Scottish university practices and his “constant intercourse and great intimacy with the members of the university of Glasgow.”<sup>19</sup> Although the College of New Jersey could not completely emulate the great universities of Scotland due to a lack of funds, Witherspoon was confident that his efforts would pay off. He emphasized the classics in his teachings, and portrayed the authors as models that no one had ever surpassed. He described Princeton’s first-year course as “Latin, Greek, classical antiquities, and rhetoric.”<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, he warned students to pay equal attention to modern writers such as Shakespeare, Pope, Hume, and Addison.<sup>21</sup>

Witherspoon’s greatest achievement, however, was his relentless promotion of the college and its educational ideals. With the passion of a true Evangelical, he traveled to

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<sup>18</sup>Sloan, 113.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>*The Selected Writings of John Witherspoon*, ed. Thomas Miller (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 314.

<sup>21</sup>Tewksbury, 57.

several states to raise support and money for his educational “city on a hill.” By the end of the century, the modern courses taught at pioneer universities such as Princeton, Philadelphia, and Dickinson became common in virtually every American college.<sup>22</sup> Even the new curriculum at Harvard required freshmen to “review the classic authors learned at school.”<sup>23</sup>

The epidemic adoption of Scottish education had widespread effects. First, the new colleges and educators distinguished themselves from English institutions to become decidedly American.<sup>24</sup> Although colonial students still learned many subjects that their French and English counterparts did, they learned from schools that were uniquely American. Eventually, schools such as Yale, Princeton, and William and Mary would teach an entirely different culture. An equally important effect was the emergence of a new American scientific community based upon the principles of the universities.<sup>25</sup> Finally, Americans had their own places to study, form, and develop new political and scientific ideas. The colonists’ adoption of the Scottish curriculum freed them from the English Moderate Enlightenment. They were no longer simply British subjects, but free thinking, different thinking Americans.

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 68.

<sup>23</sup>Stuart Andrews, “Classicism And the American Revolution,” *History Today* 24 (August 1983): 38.

<sup>24</sup>Frank Shuffleton, ed. *The American Enlightenment* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 1993), 223.

<sup>25</sup>Tewksbury, 137.



Even more important was America's introduction to the "country Whig" politics of men like Thomas Gordon, "a clever young Scotsman . . . fresh from Aberdeen University" who, according to Bernard Bailyn, began to alter the colonial outlook on politics dramatically.<sup>26</sup> With these "spokesmen for extreme libertarianism," American revolutionaries had something that their French counterparts did not: a group of writers that analyzed the events of classical and British history in the context of revolutionary reform.<sup>27</sup> No longer did Americans learn of the earlier ages of virtue as a collective Garden of Eden. Instead, they began to develop ideas to endow their corrupt present with the virtuous qualities of the past.

In the concepts of the Enlightenment, the new America saw hope. In less than a century, the country had completely transformed itself from a culturally depressed and economically dependant colony to a world leader in moral philosophy, economics and natural science. Americans such as Witherspoon and Franklin believed that the keys to Scotland's success were her universities.<sup>28</sup> Never before had the world seen such a classless, innovative, and Enlightened education system. With institutions like Princeton and Philadelphia College, and even non Anglican academies such as Liberty Hall, the American colonists made certain that Scotland's universities became models instead of

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<sup>26</sup>Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967), 35

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 26-35.

<sup>28</sup>Shuffleton, 334.

ineffective exceptions to the rule.

## American Neo-Classicism



Of the Declaration of Independence's fifty-six signatories, twenty-seven received a college education similar to the Princeton undergraduate experience.<sup>29</sup> In fact, John Witherspoon himself signed the historic document.<sup>30</sup> It is no wonder, then, that the rhetoric and propaganda of the American Revolution were steeped in classical references. Although the Enlightenment in Europe had already become enamored with the ancient civilizations, it took the American revolution to demonstrate that the newly modern world could apply the lessons of Scipio, Plutarch, and Cicero to more than hypothetical situations. The Americans' love for Greece and Rome allowed a neo-classicism unlike any seen before. This neo-classicism went beyond books, speeches and ideas into the third dimension; it was as material as a colonnaded building and as real as a revolution.

The symbols, slogans, ideas and architecture of America's love affair with classical civilization began in the schoolroom and continued to develop in revolutionary rhetoric. Pamphleteers frequent utilized classical pseudonyms. Thomas Paine often wrote under the new names "Atlanticus" or "Aesop."<sup>31</sup> Joseph Galloway entitled his

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<sup>29</sup>Andrews, 37.

<sup>30</sup>Miller, 34.

<sup>31</sup>Andrews, 38.

letters to Charles James Fox the “Letters from Cicero to Catiline the Second.”<sup>32</sup> When Alexander Hamilton and Gouverneur Morris wrote to each other, they used classical names as a sort of political code: Washington was “Scaevolo,” Jefferson was “Scipio” and Madison was “Tarquin.”<sup>33</sup>

The latter-day “Scaevolo,” “Scipio,” and “Tarquin” each had a hand in developing America’s variation of the Cult of Antiquity. Of these three revolutionaries, Washington was perhaps the least influenced by the classics. He did not receive a classical education, and was very self-conscious of this fact.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, symbols of Rome were profuse in his home at Mount Vernon. Washington gave his slaves Roman names and ordered busts of Sallust, Horace, Erasmus, and Terence for his private library.<sup>35</sup> An invoice from his English dealer included “a Groupe of Aeneas carrying his father out of Troy, neatly finished and bronzed with copper-three pounds, three shillings.”<sup>36</sup>

Washington’s greatest tribute to ancient society was his patriotic character. A true general and leader of the Revolution, he had Addison’s *Cato* performed for his troops at Valley Forge.<sup>37</sup> With the humility and grace of Cincinnatus, the General resigned as

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 33.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Tewksbury, 253.

<sup>35</sup>Andrews, 38.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>May, 37.

commander-in-chief and returned home within weeks of the formal signing of the peace treaty in 1783.<sup>38</sup> When consulted about his depiction in a Richmond statue, he refused the idea of being depicted in a toga, wearing a laurel wreath and holding a truncheon.<sup>39</sup> One may wonder, then, what this modern Cincinnatus might have thought of his neo-classic likeness that overlooks the campus of Washington and Lee University.

Thomas Jefferson may have been exaggerating when he wrote that “American farmers are the only farmers who can read Homer.”<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, the Virginia farmer tried to influence everyone he knew to read classical history. Jefferson wrote from Paris to his nephew, Peter Carr, with advice on reading. In this letter, he urged the young man to “begin a course of ancient history, reading everything in the original and not in translations.”<sup>41</sup> He also prepared a reading list for a cousin that included Voltaire’s historical works, Robertson’s history of Scotland, and most important, the writings of Montesquieu, including *Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline* and *Spirit of the Laws*.<sup>42</sup> Jefferson’s correspondence shows that the founding fathers learned their classical history from both the original sources and the *philosophes’* interpretations.

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<sup>38</sup> Andrews, 41.

<sup>39</sup> Shuffleton, 112.

<sup>40</sup> *The Family Letters of Thomas Jefferson*, eds. Edwin Morris Betts and James Adam Bear, Jr. (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1966), 443.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

They adored Republican Rome for its example of a simple rural existence.<sup>43</sup>

Jefferson's love for the classics extended well beyond his readings into art and architecture. When he designed the state capitol in Richmond, Virginia in 1784, he based the design on the Roman model of the Maison Carrée at Nîmes.<sup>44</sup> In the spirit of the later Cult of Antiquity, Jefferson chose to secularize a once-sacred ancient temple. Jefferson describes the process of his inspiration in his autobiography:

Thinking it a favourable opportunity of introducing into the State an example of architecture in the classic style of antiquity, and the Maison Quarree of Nismes, an ancient Roman temple, being considered as the most perfect example existing of what may be called cubic architecture, I applied to M. Clerissault, who had published drawings of the antiquities of Nismes, to have me a model of the building made in stucco, only changing the order from Corinthian to Ionic, on account of the difficulty of the Corinthian capitals.<sup>45</sup>

Jefferson also designed the University of Virginia, in which he attempted to meld the ideas of a rational education and classical architecture. Jefferson envisioned a "lawn" and an "academical village" constructed to exact specifications.<sup>46</sup> The overall plan borrowed a Roman pattern of porticoes and colonnades, thus creating an overwhelming sense of classical harmony. At one end of the campus, Jefferson placed

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<sup>43</sup>Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic: 1776-1787* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1969), 65.

<sup>44</sup>Desmond Guinness and Julius Trousdale Sadler, Jr., *Mr. Jefferson, Architect* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 146.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 153.

the Rotunda, closely resembling the Pantheon in Rome. It is no surprise to find that, like Princeton and Harvard, the University of Virginia required a complete knowledge of Latin of all its graduates.<sup>47</sup>

When arguing over the Writs of Assistance in the 1760's, James Otis habitually invoked the example of the Greeks. He claimed they were “kind, humane, and just towards their colonies” whereas the Romans were “cruel, barbarous, and brutal towards theirs.”<sup>48</sup> He uses Caesar as an example of the danger of standing armies, Aristotle to defend the people’s right to reform their government, and Cicero to define the “Law of Nature.” In 1774, John Dickinson’s letter from Congress to “The Inhabitants of the British Colonies in America” also drew heavily from Cicero’s writings.<sup>49</sup> In later works, Dickinson would freely quote Tacitus on the ancient British people: “Against these very powerful tribes, there was no circumstance more useful than their failure to plan in common.”<sup>50</sup> To the people of a Boston town meeting, Dickinson embodied the three main influences on the new American model. They praise him for his “Spartan, Roman, British Virtue and Christian spirit joined.”<sup>51</sup>

According to Gordon S. Wood, the period directly after the American

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<sup>47</sup>Tewksbury, 223.

<sup>48</sup>Andrews, 42.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 41.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Wood, 49.

Revolution was a golden age for neo-classicism. He writes “it was a rare newspaper essayist who did not use a Greek or Latin phrase to enhance an argument or embellish a point and who did not employ a classical signature.”<sup>52</sup> Private tutors, grammar schools, and universities alike taught their students ancient history. Society therefore expected any educated person to have at least a general knowledge of the Greco-Roman past.<sup>53</sup>

Bailyn cautions that although the colonists seemed to display a wealth of knowledge on the classics, much of this was superficial. He cites several revolutionaries, including Johnathan Mayhew and Oxenbridge Thatcher, who mistook Plato for an advocate of civil liberties.<sup>54</sup> John Adams also falsely attributed the notions of equality and liberty to Plato. Bailyn reports that Adams, upon actually reading Plato’s *Republic*, determined that the author had meant to write a satire. Despite several inaccuracies and inconsistencies, the colonists tended to use the ancients to champion the same public and private virtues found in the pre-revolutionary France of the *philosophes*.

When the Constitutional Convention met at Philadelphia, classical comparisons abounded. It was natural for the draftsmen of the new constitution to refer to historical examples. The delegates to the 1787 Constitutional Convention had done some reading

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Bailyn, 167.

<sup>54</sup>Bailyn, 241.

to prepare for the event. From Paris, Jefferson arranged for publishers to ship copies of Polybius and sets of other ancient authors to James Madison and George Wythe.<sup>55</sup> Jefferson selected Polybius because he was the leading authority on the Greek city-state. We can trace the doctrine of the separation of powers and the system of checks and balances to the works of the ancient Greek. Polybius praises Rome's use of the system during the heyday of the Republic, commenting: "The purpose of the one part can be counter-worked and thwarted by the others; none of them will excessively outgrow the others or treat them with contempt. . . . any aggressive impulse is sure to be checked." This would, Polybius claimed, make for "an equilibrium like a well-trimmed boat."<sup>56</sup> Although there were initial problems, the new American republic was an eventual success. As Polybius predicted, the government has maintained its stability and security for over two centuries .



John Trumbull wrote his "Elegy on the times" after the events of 1774 and the calling of the first Continental Congress inspired him with a love of the classic past:

Now meet the Fathers of the Western clime,  
 Nor names more noble graced the roll of fame,  
 When Spartan firmness braved the wrecks of time,  
 Or Latin virtue fanned the hero's flame.  
 Nor deeper thought the immortal sage inspired

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<sup>55</sup> Andrews, 36.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.



On Solon's lips when Grecian senates hung;  
Nor manlier eloquence the bosom fired  
When genius thundered from the Athenian tongue.<sup>57</sup>

The American War for Independence had implications that far outstripped its immediate goal of separation from Britain. It encouraged many other colonies to seek autonomy from the European empires, and continues to inspire nations to strive for freedom. Most important, however, was the Americans' example of a modern republic, the first of its kind. After 1776, liberals around the world, especially those in France, looked to men like Washington, Jefferson, and Adams as the new "Fathers of the Western clime." The lessons that the Americans took from antiquity, and the success with which they acted upon those lessons, proved that mankind was not in general decline. The Americans demonstrated that reformists should not merely revere the Greco-Roman past, they should improve upon it. With this notion, they would rival the *philosophes* as the French pre-revolutionaries' chief influence, and open the way for epidemic change.

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<sup>57</sup>John Trumbull, *Satiric Poems*, ed. Edwin T. Bowden (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962), 44.

**CHAPTER 4**  
**HIGH NOON:**  
**A SHOWDOWN BETWEEN RADICALS AND CONSERVATIVES**

In a brilliant narrative about the French Revolution entitled *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*, Simon Schama suggests that after the French Revolutionaries came to power, their most formidable task still lay ahead. The revolutionaries, in his well-chosen words, had to begin “improvising a nation.”<sup>1</sup> Although the examples of the *philosophes* and the American Revolution do much to explain the intellectual and societal origins of the Cult of Antiquity, they are insufficient nonetheless. The French revolution had an ideological as well as a political existence, and revolutionaries such as Robespierre and Danton had to deal with both. Any *philosophe’s* theory of a perfect society was just that: a theory. It worked well for the sake of philosophy, but had yet to stand the test of application. Likewise, American revolutionaries never guaranteed that their neo-classicist republic was infallible or permanent. Throughout Europe, the Revolution of 1789 marked the end of the Enlightenment and the beginning of the age of applied theory.

The French Revolution differed greatly from America’s experiences and the Utopias of Montesquieu and Rousseau. Although they used the Enlightenment and the American Revolution as models, French politicians were generally on their own. As discussed in the second chapter, they did not even enjoy the support of those for whom they sought “fraternité, liberté and égalité.” Initially, any revolutionary who aligned himself with the *philosophes* became alienated from his would-be constituents by

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<sup>1</sup>Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 333.

affronting their *ancien régime* conservatism. The United States had only recently gained their independence, and no political theorist could predict their ultimate fate. French politicians, then, could use neither philosophy nor America as viable precedents to determine their movement's future. The final chapter of this thesis will explore the French Cult of Antiquity at the height of its prominence by following three main political models through the revolutionary period and analyzing the patriots' efforts to "improvise a nation."

## The Need for a Cult



Whether they preached conservative or radical reform, the French Revolutionaries suffered for having no true history. Having usurped control from the monarchy, they realized the need to act quickly and decisively, lest they become overtaken by their own revolution. Placed in this precarious position, the revolutionaries began to look for precedents upon which they might legitimize their motives and their newfound positions. As Parker suggests, the most readily available precedent for one side was the classical past. Parker, however, does not discuss what the final chapter of this will set out to demonstrate: that the French may have initiated their Cult of Antiquity out of a psychological and political need. Parker does not make such conjecture, but the idea presented here is perhaps implicit in his title, which describes something that would normally be a simple academic interest as a "cult."

After 1789, conservatives linked the monarchical system with the nation's Frankish history to legitimize their positions, with considerable success. French society was wary of change without precedent, and the popularity of such royalist publications as *L'Ami du Roi* continued unabated. One edition of *L'Ami du Roi* likens the events in 1789 with those in 1385, claiming that both had their origins in financial problems and the prices of bread. The abbé Royou, editor of the piece, writes, "people are wrong to think that the revolution we are witnessing does not resemble any of those of past centuries."<sup>2</sup>

In the National Assembly, conservative orators asked the citizenry to remember its French past when considering future actions. When the Assembly discussed the placement of the national flag on 15 July 1790, the abbé Maury declared that the nation should entrust the flag to the king because he was still supreme military commander.<sup>3</sup> In this example, the abbé similarly relies on French monarchical history to support his view.

As radical revolutionaries attempted to deal with their uncertain present, they took comfort in a past that they had mastered since their days at the *collèges*. They had to create the Utopias and heros of the Cult of Antiquity for a reason. French radicals sought justification in the past through history just as the ancients sought it in mythology. They knew that they could not directly cite the *philosophes* as their intellectual forbears; the

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<sup>2</sup>Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 29.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.



Enlightenment was still too unpopular to raise any meaningful support among French citizens. Instead, the radicals attempted to create a past with an even deeper tradition than the Frankish past of their conservative opponents. Thus, the Revolutionary Cult of Antiquity was born.

The radical representation of antiquity manifested itself quickly in the art and rhetoric of revolution. Plays became important political tools for the radicals. Lynn Hunt reports that between 1789 and 1799, theaters produced and performed more than 1,500 new plays. Many of these promoted the liberal revolutionary message, both implicitly and explicitly.<sup>4</sup>

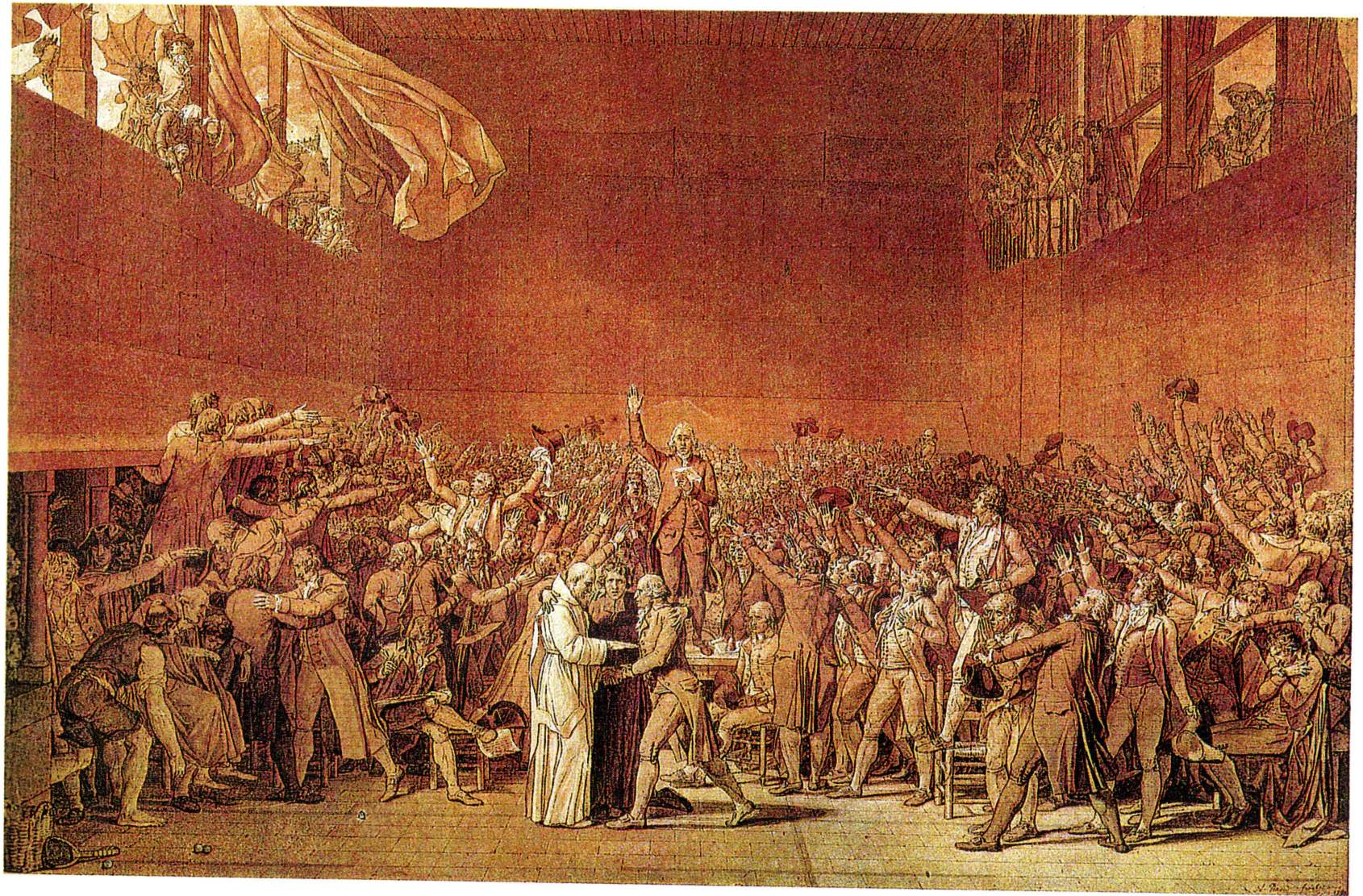
The theater was not the only medium in which art and politics merged. The painter Jacques-Louis David became a favorite of the liberals in power for his neo-classic depictions of political and personal virtues. David's *The Oath of the Horatii* best idealized the images of ancient society that the liberal revolutionaries sought to bring to mainstream France. The German critic J.H. Tischbein said of the piece, "No affair of state of ancient Rome, no papal election of recent Rome, ever stirred feelings more strongly."<sup>5</sup>

The piece depicts Livy's story of the period of wars between Rome and Alba in 669B.C. Livy reports that two sets of three brothers from each city were to engage in

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>5</sup>Warren Roberts, *Jacques-Louis David: Revolutionary Artist* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 16.





moral combat, thus ultimately settling the dispute between the cities.<sup>6</sup> David depicts the three Horatii directly before they meet their foes, the three Curiatii. In an ironic twist, it happens that one of the Horatii is married to the sister of the Curiatii. Likewise, the Horatii's sister is married to the Curiatii. David places these two women in the background of the painting to mourn the imminent death of either a brother or a husband.

In his famous painting *The Tennis Court Oath*, David embodies another key tradition of the liberal revolutionaries' Cult of Antiquity: the public display of national pride. To replace the pomp and circumstance of royal coronations and ceremonies, the liberal revolutionaries turned to festivals and public oath declarations to win, keep, and control public approval. Although these modern "Roman circuses" served as an opiate to the French masses, Mona Ozouf concludes that they did much more. In her work entitled *Festivals of the French Revolution*, Ozouf argues that the festivals of the revolution reflect an "identical collective need" of the French people to "transfer sacrality" from the monarch to the people as sovereigns.<sup>7</sup>

Jean Starobinski offers a similar analysis in his *1789: The Emblems of Reason*. In this study, he argues that the oaths of the patriots, constantly made and remade throughout the revolution, served a unique and modern purpose. It was through these public displays, he posits, that the people gave themselves the new "popular sovereignty" that

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<sup>6</sup>Luc de Nanteuil, *Jacques-Louis David* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Publishers, 1985), 90.

<sup>7</sup>Mona Ozouf, *Festivals of the French Revolution*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), 346.

they had wrested from the monarchy.<sup>8</sup> Eventually, the acceptance of this self-conception grew in popularity. The revolutionary rhetoric after 1791 demonstrates that the French had all but abandoned the Frankish model of the conservatives. The question was no longer which past the revolutionaries were to evoke, but which classical past they were to emulate.

## Rome Revisited



On 20 January, 1793, a day before Louis XVI's execution, a former guardsman of the King assassinated Lepelletier Saint-Fargeau, a patriot deputy and leader of the revolutionary cause.<sup>9</sup> French revolutionaries mourned his death with a funeral procession and burial worthy of antiquity. Guards carried Lepelletier's bloody clothes on the end of a pike covered with oak and cypress. Mourners exposed his body to view on the pedestal in the Place Vendôme, and placed his bust in the hall of the National Assembly next to Brutus'.<sup>10</sup> Such a display of antique style was common in the period following the abolition of the monarchy in 1792. France was now a republic, and politicians now urged

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<sup>8</sup>Jean Starobinski, *1789: The Emblems of Reason*, trans. Barbara Bray (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1981), 58.

<sup>9</sup>Henderson

<sup>10</sup>Henderson

outright imitation of the Roman ideal.<sup>11</sup>

As the French sought to replace the political institutions of the fallen *ancien régime*, they became obsessed with the example of the Roman Republic. Writings from the period supported the arguments of both prorepublicans and antirepublicans in their debates in the Constituent and Legislative Assemblies. The antirepublican orator Jacques de Cazalès spoke against a proposal for popular elections:

If I cited those illustrious victims of the errors and violence of the people; if I reminded you that Coriolanus was banished, that Camillus was exiled, that the Gracchi were immolated at the foot of the tribunal; if I said that the assemblies of the Roman people were only conspiracies, that the *comitia* were only full of plotters; if I showed you the public forum changed into a battlefield; if I told you that there was not one election, not one law, not one judgment which was not a civil war, you would agree that there are inconveniences in popular government. . . . Perhaps this faithful picture of the disorders of a republic which merited the admiration of all peoples, and which was mistress of the universe, will no doubt have some effect on your mind, on your heart: and do not believe that this digression is irrelevant; every people which holds elections will be subject to the same inconveniences.<sup>12</sup>

Cazalès' depiction of Roman history is interesting. He pairs together Coriolanus and Camillus as victims of plebian injustice, but in neither case does he divulge the complete story. Camillus was a patrician who served as a military tribune and dictator for

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<sup>11</sup>M.J. Sydenham, *The French Revolution* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1965), 192.

<sup>12</sup>David H.J. Larmour, "History Recreated or Malfunctioned Desire?: The Roman Republic Remembered in the French Revolution" in *The French Revolution in Culture and Society*, eds. David G. Troyansky, Alfred Cismaru, and Norwood Andrews, Jr. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1991), 39.

Rome. His army was responsible for the capture of Veii in 392 B.C.<sup>13</sup> Both Plutarch and Livy write that Roman citizens saw his triumphant, grand return to the city as a display of arrogance.<sup>14</sup> Livy also reports that the unvirtuous ruler refused to allow citizens to emigrate to the newly conquered Veii and refused to dedicate a tenth of the spoils of war to Apollo, as he had promised. Although the citizenry was angry with him, they did not banish him. Instead, Camillus went into hiding after they accused him of stealing Tuscan goods.<sup>15</sup>

Cazalès seems likewise misinformed about the Gracchi brothers, who died at the hands of conservative senators rather than plebian mob violence.<sup>16</sup> The Gracchi were brothers who were both elected tribune ten years apart. P. Scipio Nascia, the Pontifex Maximus, and his followers clubbed Tiberius Gracchus to death when he introduced an agrarian law that called for more even land distribution.<sup>17</sup> The younger Gracchus died at the hands of the Equites when he attempted to reintroduce his brother's agrarian bill along with his own reforms.<sup>18</sup>

Liberal politicians such as Desmoulins, Brissot, and Petion evoked the Roman

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 40.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

example to support the republican cause. Schama reports that Desmoulins quoted from Cicero over forty-three times during his relatively short career in the revolutionary assemblies.<sup>19</sup> The Abbé Boisgelin wrote that “when Cicero spoke in the Senate, he was the father of his country.”<sup>20</sup> These liberals recalled the lessons of their *collèges* and emphasized the private virtues of republican citizens and the reflective virtue of their society:

good morals were cultivated at home and in the field, . . . justice and probity prevailed among them thanks not so much to laws as to nature. Quarrels, discord and strife were reserved for their enemies; citizens contended with each other only in merit. They were lavish in offerings to the gods, frugal at home and loyal to their friends.<sup>21</sup>

The orations of the republicans served their purpose; in 1792, the French revolutionaries decided to abolish the monarchy in favor of a new republic. In these times, the Roman Cult of Antiquity flourished. The French began to view certain virtuous citizens as “saints” for their secular religion. Politicians constantly invoked the likes of Brutus, Cato, and Publicola in their speeches and documents.<sup>22</sup> Revolutionaries began to rename towns, districts, and streets to reflect the new national enthusiasm. Paris

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<sup>19</sup>Schama, 155.

<sup>20</sup>Harold T. Parker, *The Cult of Antiquity and the French Revolutionaries* (Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 1937), 112.

<sup>21</sup>Schama, 361.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

had rues des Brutus, de Scaevola, des Gracques, de Manlius, de Caton, de Fabius, and de Regulus.<sup>23</sup> Some people even renamed themselves to reflect their new republican ideals. Brissot changed his name to “Brutus” and Roland changed his to “Cato the Younger.”<sup>24</sup> Francois-Noël Babeuf changed from “Camillus” in 1791 to “Gaius Gracchus” in 1793.

He gives this explanation:

I would rather die simply like the Gracchi, whose lives I also admire, and under whose exclusive tutelage I place myself from now on. . . . I even declare that I renounce. . . . Camille. . . . because now my democratic belief has been purified, has become more austere, and I have not liked the Temple of Concord built by and for Camillus, which is only the monument which sanctifies a transaction in which this devoted spokesman of the senatorial and patrician caste, and false and insidious advocate of the plebians, negotiated arrangements between the two parties which, without him, could have been more completely advantageous to the people.<sup>25</sup>

Like their political foes, however, the republican cultists were not perfect in their interpretations of classical men. Cato, for example, appears in many speeches and letters as a pro-republican. Liberals from Desmoulins to Robespierre identify with Cato, who probably would have scoffed at the ideas of “liberté, égalité, et fraternité.” The ancient Roman took every opportunity to curtail the power of the urban plebs. Any biography would demonstrate him to be a model proponent of senatorial domination and aristocratic

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<sup>23</sup>Parker, 142.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Larmour, 39.

privilege.<sup>26</sup>

The Roman tradition provided French Revolutionaries with excellent examples of the private virtues of the *collège* and the public virtues of the *philosophe*. By the same token, Rome's authors and historians seemed to give the radicals too much information. Debaters could use the model of Republican Rome to support virtually any political or personal value system. Parker notes that this plurality of meaning, combined with the ubiquity of Roman example, worked to undermine the cult. The French eventually would become disenchanted because they were inundated with the ambiguities of the ancient texts.

## The Republican Ideal: Sparta and Rousseau



When revolutionaries began to confront the harsh realities of war and *coups d'état*, they did so with the lessons of antiquity and the untested theories of the Enlightenment. After years of assimilation, the time was finally ripe to use the *philosophes* as political examples, and apply their analyses of classical culture to France's troubled present. Most notably, the radicals used Montesquieu and Rousseau for their notions of civic virtue. J. Robert Loy explains their influence in near-cultist terms when

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<sup>26</sup>Parker, 173.

he writes, “In General, Montesquieu is the patron saint of the first half or constitutional era of the French Revolution, Rousseau consistently a guiding spirit, particularly in the movements to the extreme left.”<sup>27</sup> Robespierre, in his “Dedication to Jean-Jacques Rousseau,” calls the *philosophe* a “divine man” and writes “the old edifice is crumbling: the portico of a new edifice is rising upon its ruins, and, thanks to you, I have brought my stone to it.”<sup>28</sup> Other politicians also used the philosophers’ familiarity with the classics to broaden their own appeal among French citizens and introduce Enlightenment ideals to the fallen *ancien régime*.

Although Montesquieu presents a favorable picture of Roman, Athenian, and Spartan republics, the revolutionaries chose to concentrate their efforts on the latter model.<sup>29</sup> In *Persian Letters*, Montesquieu teaches that the secret behind the ancient city-state’s success was an unconditional sense of virtue, which he describes as “a love for the nation and for equality”<sup>30</sup> His parable of the Troglodytes, once ignored by eighteenth-century France, now had a fresh audience. French citizens learned that, according to Montesquieu, a community of “les vertueux” (virtuous citizens) did not need a powerful

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<sup>27</sup>J. Robert Loy, *Montesquieu* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1968), 132.

<sup>28</sup>Clay Ramsay, *The Ideology of the Great Fear* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1992), 249.

<sup>29</sup>Norman Hampson, “The Heavenly City of the French Revolutionaries,” in *Rewriting the French Revolution*, ed. Colin Lucas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 64.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 47.



government because each citizen could rely upon the “civic virtue” of his countrymen.<sup>31</sup>

His revolutionary supporters used these notions in their attempts to mobilize the citizenry and remove the aristocracy and the monarchy from the government. Montesquieu’s subsequent works, however, provided little inspiration for the politicians of the late eighteenth century.

As Montesquieu’s writings progressed, so too did his philosophy. In *The Spirit of the Laws*, he proposed that liberty, not virtue, was the key to a nation’s success.<sup>32</sup> He discovered that the classical model of government, as described in *Persian Letters*, was inconsistent with the type of liberty necessary for an effective nation. In creating his new “separation of powers” model, Montesquieu traded the Greek ideal of collective will for a model society wherein the divergent views of the citizens checked and balanced each other for a strong and effective national equilibrium. Because Montesquieu adopted the English parliamentary system as his new model, we must abandon him as a chief influence of the Cult of Antiquity. Indeed, this is exactly what the revolutionaries sought to do when they realized his inconsistencies.<sup>33</sup> Instead, we will turn to the *philosophe* who most regularly and vehemently campaigned for the classical republics: Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

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<sup>31</sup>Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, trans. C.J. Betts (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 60.

<sup>32</sup>Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Thomas Nugent (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1949), 235.

<sup>33</sup>Ramsay, 248.

Saint-Just in *Spirit of the Revolution* praises both Rousseau and Montesquieu and attempts to meld their ideas into a single, consistent philosophy. He and Robespierre developed the Jacobin ideology from this fusion, and continued to expand the philosophy until their deaths in 1794.<sup>34</sup> Although its founders based the so-called “Republic of Virtue” on idealistic principles, war, intrigue, and suspicion ensured that the idealistic Utopia of Rousseau’s and Robespierre’s dreams would never prove feasible.

Like Montesquieu, Rousseau addressed the issue of liberty, but his notions were entirely different from those of the earlier philosopher. For him, freedom meant freedom from political sin. Rousseau was the first French thinker to replace God with a General Will of society, claiming that the individual only became a moral being when he entered a society that dictated his civic and ethical duties through the collective well-being.<sup>35</sup> Norman Hampson writes that Rousseau thought of *vox populi* as *vox dei*.<sup>36</sup> Once the people expressed their collective will, that will was immutable law. A society’s perfection depended upon its degree of unanimity. These concepts of General Will served the revolutionaries much better than Montesquieu’s ideas, and the men who formed the Republic of Virtue were quick to adopt them.

Hampson likens Rousseau to “a kind of guru, a sort of Wesley who inspired them.

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<sup>34</sup>Loy, 133.

<sup>35</sup>Hampson, 50.

<sup>36</sup>Hampson, 53.

. . . His effect was that of a revivalist preacher.”<sup>37</sup> This description of a Wesleyan *philosophe* suggests a marked departure from the Age of Reason and moderation. Saint-Just said of Rousseau “France has just, finally, voted a statue to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Ah! Why did that great man die?”<sup>38</sup> In *Spirit of the Revolution*, Saint-Just adopts Rousseau’s “General Will” sovereign and, in doing so, attempts to combine the “fatherland” idea of ancient times with the “children” of that land:

People will ask whether I believe seriously that the Constitution of France, such as it stands now, is the will of all: I reply categorically no; because it is impossible, when a people accepts a new contract (the first being lost or soiled) that rascals and malcontents not form two parties; but it would be a strange abuse of the letter to take the resistance of a few rascals for a part of the will. General rule: all will, even sovereign, that inclines toward perversity is null and void; Rousseau did not say everything when he characterized will as uncommunicable, non-prescriptible, eternal. It must also be just and reasonable.<sup>39</sup>

Through Saint-Just, Rousseau states that man has compromised his essential goodness by his dependence upon society. The only remedy is to dissolve completely into the state and avoid unnatural ties to other humans. The ideal citizen must transform his self-love into public virtue when he embraces the state.

The difficulties that transformed the Republic of Virtue into the Terror were twofold. First, Rousseau did not properly define the “Legislator” in his

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<sup>37</sup>Hampson, 51.

<sup>38</sup>Loy, 132.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 134.

concept of the Social Contract. Also, Robespierre's notions of human rights and justice in relation to the General Will were severely flawed.<sup>40</sup> These essential gaps in theory were among the chief causes of the Great Fear and the Reign of Terror during the Revolution.

Rousseau describes the need for "a superior intelligence, who sees all human passions and does not experience any of them" so that men can "discover the best rules of society appropriate to the Nations"<sup>41</sup> While this idea may not be flawed, Rousseau does not proffer a way to determine who possesses the "superior intelligence." During the revolution, many cultists claimed to be the Legislator. Unfortunately they attempted to prove this by force, which would seem contrary to the best interests of the people.

Robespierre and his supporters saw their Republic of Virtue as an ancient model practicing its right to self-defense against the wars and revolutions that sought to undermine it. Like their classical counterparts, the revolutionary republicans attempted to mobilize an entire nation in times of war. The government declared every male between the age of eighteen and sixty mobilized for the war effort. Although only those aged twenty-five and below went into the army, the Republic sent the remainder to wherever their services were needed.<sup>42</sup> The nation, as a whole, was at war.

The Republic attacked domestic opposition with the same ferocity. Hampson

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<sup>40</sup>Carol Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 97.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 111.

<sup>42</sup>Hampson, 60.

explains that to the people of the eighteenth century, the word “republic” had the sort of connotations that “soviet” or “communist” might have had in our own century.<sup>43</sup> This form of government was entirely new, and yet Robespierre and the revolutionaries expected immediate and wholesale assimilation. When it became clear that this would not happen, a political backlash occurred. Robespierre created such political groups as the Committee of Public Safety to maintain internal order during times of diplomatic strife. The result was terror.

In Robespierre’s notion of government, those who did not submit to the Rousseauian General Will were outlaws. Worse, they were below the law. Juries could find individuals guilty on moral rather than judicial grounds and crimes against the state could be as trivial or ambiguous as “weakness, avarice, or bloody-mindedness.”<sup>44</sup> In true Spartan form, the government believed that any individual who opposed the General Will was an enemy of the state. That individual lost all judicial and governmental rights.<sup>45</sup>

Rousseau’s theories, then, when applied to Revolutionary France, became highly problematic. By making itself the defender of the Revolution, the Republic betrayed its three fundamental principles: separation of powers, the rule of law and national sovereignty. We cannot blame this failure on the *philosophe*, however, for he insists in *Du*

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 56.

<sup>44</sup>Ramsay, 62.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

*Contrat Social* that his ideas were for a community no larger than Geneva.<sup>46</sup>



By 1795, the Terror had removed or killed most of the devotees of Republican imitation. The Republican Cult of Antiquity had, in effect, destroyed itself through misapplication and misinterpretation. In its place grew a new, strong reaction against the model of antiquity. This reaction to the terror seems to recall the teachings of the *collèges* earlier in the century. Politicians once again exhorted France to emulate the virtues of the private citizens of ancient Greece and Rome instead of their public governmental institutions Parker reports that in the debate over the constitution of 1795, the ancient republics are far more often condemned than praised.<sup>47</sup> The Thermidorian reaction also banned the adoption of Roman and Greek names. In art and archaeology, interest in the classics continued unabated.<sup>48</sup> Politically, however, the Cult of Antiquity was dead.

Classical civilization was a past that the French Revolutionaries interpreted in many different ways, both correctly and incorrectly. Scholars should not explore the Cult of Antiquity as the study of definite history. This thesis has demonstrated that such an approach would overlook several factual and interpretive errors that politicians and

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<sup>46</sup>Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin Books, 1968), 23.

<sup>47</sup>Parker, 178.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

citizens made on both sides of the arguments. Instead, we should understand how aptly named the Cult of Antiquity is. It was indeed a cult, and was therefore subject to many levels of interpretation and application. We cannot pigeonhole history or assert that it gives us a single lesson. Any study of a cult that professes to search for one true meaning in the actions and events of the past will fall into the same traps that claimed the Revolutionaries.

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