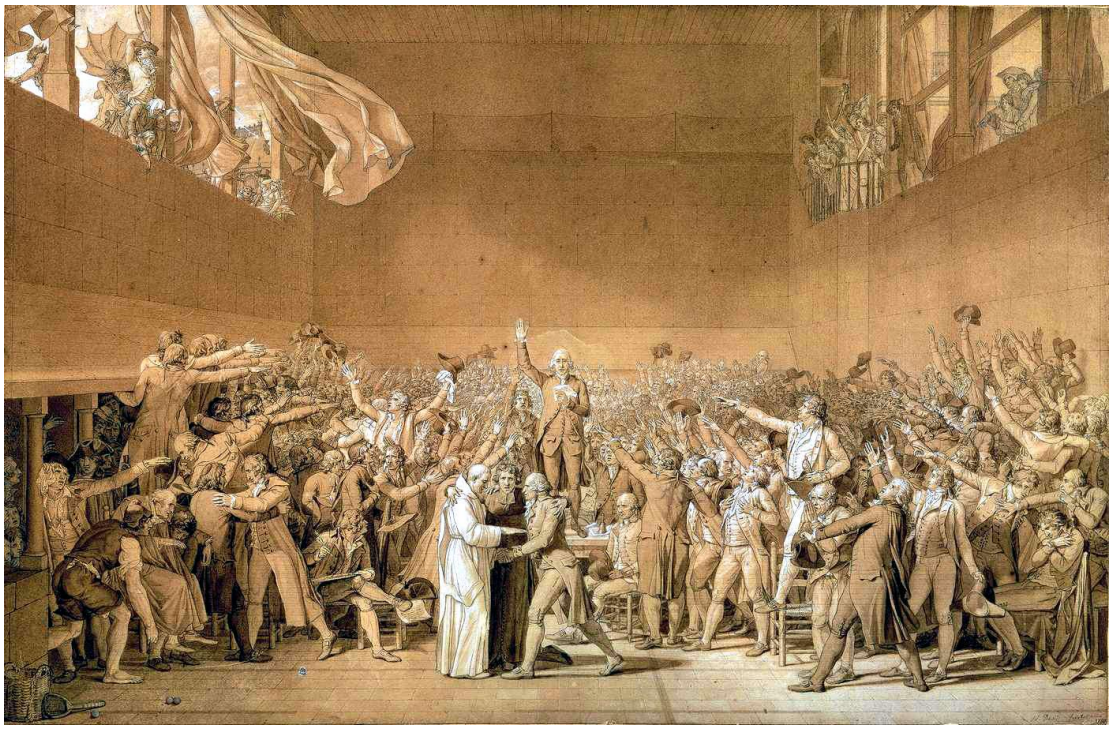
To what extent have historians settled the debate about the significance of the Enlightenment in the origins of the French Revolution?



Jacques Louis-David, The Tennis Court Oath, 1790-1794

The winds of change blow through the windows of the royal tennis court as Protestants and Catholics, sans culottes and nobility, unite. Sieyès is seated below Jean-Sylvain Bailly, contemplating as one of the most monumental events of the French Revolution unfolds in front of him; he sits wordlessly yet it was supposedly his words that launched the French Revolution. Jacques Louis-David's placement of the *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers Etat?* (1789) author almost central of the scene symbolises the revolutionaries' beliefs that their actions were *enlightened*. Sieyès himself was a man of the Enlightenment; he had been influenced by the works of the *Encyclopédistes* and Mirabeau, had studied John Locke's theologies, and expounded upon theories of national sovereignty popularised by Rousseau in his *Social Contract* (1762). The French Revolutionaries had very much claimed that their actions and aspirations were inspired by the great *philosophes* of the Enlightenment, and until modern revisions, historians have generally taken their word for it. Since the revisions, different schools of history have contributed to the debate of the Enlightenment's significance during the Revolution in France. However, to what extent has this debate been resolved?

The first step to analysing the importance of the Enlightenment is to define what the movement *was*. Each *philosophe* can seem to be campaigning for entirely separate things; while Montesquieu argued for constitutional monarchy and saw no benefits in a Republic, Rousseau believed in the power of a national sovereignty and the formation of a Republic. Montesquieu never took to Locke's theories on the social contract and the right to revolt in the event of this being broken, despite the former claiming to be a disciple of 'the Father of Classical Liberalism'. The complexity of interpretation has meant that there is no concrete definition of the Enlightenment, and this has further confused matters in the debate of its importance leading up to the French Revolution. Kant was the first to attempt to define the Enlightenment; he named it the last awakening of mankind, and a movement away from tutelage. Bertrand Russell defined the Enlightenment in terms of an attack against oppressive structures by using tactics first used in the Protestant reply to the counter-

reformation. First, the ideologies and what they served needs to be explored in order to arrive at any conclusion.

Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu, more simply known as Montesquieu contributed to political theory during the Age of Enlightenment. Montesquieu had been influenced by the changes in England, namely the introduction of a constitutional monarchy tailing the victory of the Civil War. In his *'De l'esprit des lois'* (1748), Montesquieu argued a constitutional monarchy as the ideal for achieving liberty, and lauded England for its success. Montesquieu saw a republic and the idea of democracy as a gateway for mob rule, and he regarded the masses of common people unfit to discuss public affairs, thus the responsibility to guide the government fell to the social elite. A member of the nobility himself, Montesquieu's structure of a liberal constitutional monarchy reserved a place for nobles, explaining that along with the sovereign courts, they should act as 'intermediary bodies' between the monarch and his subject, expounding that the power held by the nobility and courts to resist is the prevention of monarchic despotism. Conservatively, the monarchy, and clergy were named as the other two estates. For the public, despotism was generally accepted to be a predisposition of the Crown, and the public belief that the government had to constantly work against the King's despotic tendencies lasted until 1788. However, by 1789, Montesquieu's desire for shared power folded when both the Ecclesiastical and noble estates ruled his proposal unattainable, at the first meeting of the *etats-generaux* in May. Unlike the under privileged individuals of the Third Estate, the privileged estates had no desire to relinquish any portion of their privileges and consent to Montesquieu's proposed constitution. This further became true following the unforeseen circumstance that was the King's flight to Varennes in 1792. The idea of a shared sovereignty was being overtaken, by a yearning for an undivided sovereignty, one that would allow the people to keep sovereignty to themselves. A second, more radical and regicidal phase began to cultivate, and it was calling for a Republic.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's popularity grew to that akin to religious devotion; in 1790 his bust along with a copy of *Social Contract* was placed in the meeting space of the National Assembly and the Jacobin club of Paris, and there had been a double in numbers of essays and artefacts dedicated to 'the man from Savoy' during the outbreak of the Revolution. Rousseau's *Social Contract* has certainly been viewed as the catalyst for the major changes experienced from 1789-1795, although arguably it was Rousseau's *Confessions* that brought the most amount of widespread support for his republican ideology after 1789. Rousseau tried his hardest to become a champion for the oppressed, named 'the divine Rousseau, a man so good, so simple, and sublime' by one devotee [1], Rousseau made himself known as the people's philosopher, he lived an exemplary life and promoted virtue and freedom, positing that man can only be free once it becomes self-ruling. Rousseau also espoused a civil religion replacing Christianity, and sanctioned the leader of the republic, in collaboration with the state powers, to override previous dictates. This catered perfectly to the body of people who were desperate for their own sovereign power.

The rise of Robespierre is regarded as the most influential time of Rousseau's *Social Contract* in the French Revolution, and some historians have even elevated Robespierre as the embodiment of Rousseau's ideologies; of Robespierre, François Furet stated 'he was the only leader to voice the pure revolutionary ideology, and to use his mastery of communication as an instrument to conquer and retain power… to him people were either

[1] Joan Macdonald, *Rousseau and the French Revolution* (Athlone P., 1965) p. 173

good or evil… patriots or traitors'[2]. Robespierre certainly used Rousseau's rhetoric during the reign of terror, however this was a distortion of the ideas expressed in *Social Contract*; Robespierre and the terror governments were selective with taking sections of Rousseau's works that would justify their deeds, and other parts of his texts were deliberately ignored. In 1793, the exclusion of the assembly and involvement of the people in direct decision-making on no account resulted in the popular sovereignty advocated in *Social Contract,* since the assembly never passed the draft constitution. Clearly, Robespierre did not wish to jeopardise the gains made by the Revolution by passing into the hands of the people the power of sovereignty. Rousseau had written that once freedom had been lost it could 'never be regained', and Robespierre was in a position to be selective about his adherence to Rousseau whilst using the language to warrant action and interpretation of events.

Satire was the weapon for Voltaire, the man who adopted an aggressive form of Deism as a member of the salon, and rejected the concept of a republic in favour of keeping a strong and able king. Voltaire's most notable fictional philosophical works include *Zadig* (1747) and *Candide, ou l'Optimisme* (1759). While *Zadig* focused mainly on humiliating the French royal court and their rituals, *Candide* was an attack on the Enlightenment and religious reasoning. Voltaire illustrated the follies of optimism through his two characters; Pangloss, an amateur philosopher, and his eager student Candide, a bastard nephew of the Baroness Thunder-ten-Tronckh, who believe that this is 'the best of all possible worlds' despite horrifying things happening to them throughout the story. Following the motif from his previous work *Zadig*, Voltaire bestows the question: is it possible for a moral person to be happy in an immoral world? The moral character Candide, although more naïve than moral, does in the end find happiness growing vegetables in a garden, still clinging to the notion that all is for the best, although the reader is left in disbelief that a person can experience such evil and yet is so blindly optimistic. The symbolism used is of course for Christianity, for Voltaire the God of Classical Theism was non-existent and reasoning the belief in such a perfect God would be nonsensical. Throughout the novel, Voltaire introduces corrupt clergymen caricatures to represent the hypocritical and abusive nature of the Church, and he scrutinises the greed for money, which is demonstrated through Candide's journey to Eldorado to create more problems that it resolves. Voltaire had also been a disciple of the English philosophers, while in exile he adopted the ideas of John Locke, and Voltaire's discourse was an admiration of kings who imposed progressive methods on their people.

Of course this is only a brief encounter with the Enlightenment, which stretched from the study of science by such men as Isaac Newton, to advances in theatrical works [3] however, these are the three philosophers most closely linked with the French Revolution and so this is the reasoning behind studying their works in particular; to glance at how their works may be referenced in terms of the Revolution's roots. For example, it can be argued that Montesquieu's works were used in the very early stages of the Revolution, when the nobles appeared to be the most active. It is clear that the Enlightenment was not a collection of *philosophes* thinking in one mind. Conclusively, the difficulty to universally define the movement is the first unresolved hurdle in the cultural argument.

Contemporaries were the first to put forth the suggestion that the Enlightenment had some part in the Revolution. In August 1789, Edmund Burke wrote in a letter that the spirit of the

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[2] François Furet in François Crouzet, *Historians and the French Revolution* (University College of Swansea, 1989)

[3] For example, Alexander Sumarokov, who introduced classical theatre to Russia in the mid 1700s

French Revolution was 'impossible not to admire' [4]. However in another letter one month later Burke called France 'a country undone' [5]. A year later, Burke published a text reflecting on the events of the French Revolution[6]. In this, Burke condemned the revolutionaries to failure, arguing that the foundation of their newfound constitution was based on abstract philosophies incapable of accommodating the complexities of human nature and forever transitioning society. Although the frightful Reign of Terror had not yet begun by the time of the publication of *Reflections* in 1790, Burke's writings exude a fear for the possibilities brought about by the Enlightenment. For Burke, the Enlightenment's rejection of divine appointment of monarchs, and doctrine of original sin, was too much; 'we are not savages… we are not the converts of Rousseau... the disciples of Voltaire… atheists are not our preachers; madmen are not our law makers.'[7] and he warned the English public against becoming affected by such ideas of the Enlightenment. Burke was very much a believer in divinely appointed monarchy as well as gradual reform rather than revolution, and maintained that the Revolution in France had only given opportunity for the 'enlightened' tyrannical figures to shift the power of the divinely appointed aristocracy to themselves. Burke's prediction came true with the Reign of Terror, and thus his text became the starting philosophic work for right-wing history, or Conservatism.

Daniel Mornet began the modern discussion on the intellectual origins of the Revolution, with his publication of surveys in 1910 [8]. Mornet challenged the idea that the Enlightenment had much to do with the political outburst of 1789. By studying five hundred French eighteenth century private libraries, Mornet found only one copy of the Social Contract, thus raising the question of how widespread Enlightenment works truly were before the Revolution. It seems, with Mornet's discoveries, that it is more likely Rousseau's Social Contract became most influential after the epoch of the French Revolution. Roger Chartier further argued that it was in an attempt to legitimise their actions that the revolutionaries created the intellectual legacy of the Revolution, that is to say the revolution created the influence of the Enlightenment rather than the other way around [9]. Mornet posited political issues as the root of the climate of opinion, which had been evolving from heavy undermining of the church, in turn leading to criticism of the society and state that maintained it, and this criticism reached a peak between 1748 and 1770. As a consequence of such open discussion and critique, by the late 1780s disenchantment with the established order spread much further than the petit *salons* of Paris, to all social levels. Therefore, revolution had not been the plan of the Enlightenment *philosophes*, although they may have been extremely eloquent instruments for the eighteenth century grievances. Mornet's breakthrough revealed that the most celebrated thinkers of the Enlightenment held no more influence than any other less well-known philosophic writers before 1789. The Revisionist argument was established, the Enlightenment had been harmless; it would only be when the Ancièn Regime began to collapse for an accumulation of reasons that it would gain influence and significance.

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[4] J. C. D. Clark (ed.), *Reflections on the Revolution in France. A Critical Edition* (Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 61.

[5] ^Clark, p. 62

[6] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France.* (James Dodsley, Pall Mall, London, 1790)

[7] ^Burke, p. 127

[8] James Miller, *Rousseau: Dreamer of Democracy* (Hackett Publishing, 1984) p. 134

[9] Roger Chartier, *Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* (Duke University Press, 1991)

Ten years later, Georges Lefebvre revivified the argument for the importance of the Enlightenment in the French Revolution [10]. Carrying the banner for Marxist history, Lefebvre designated the Enlightenment as the ideology of the rising bourgeoisie, who were attracted to the notions of rationality, individuality, and utility. The Enlightenment had helped the bourgeoisie to declare their actions were for the benefit of society, although the ideas were actually desirable ends in themselves for the ambitious emerging class. Lefebvre argued that the role of the Enlightenment had been created by groups of the Revolution; hence the Enlightenment was not the cause of the Revolution although the social groups had been.

When the Enlightenment's influence is put into question, there is a tendency to blame the philosophes for their indirect involvement in events that are considered flawed, or mistakes in the scheme of the French Revolution. In *Interpreting the French Revolution* [11] François Furet viewed the roots of 1789 and the Reign of Terror, and the actions of Robespierre and other radicals of government, as products of the *philosophes'* writings particularly that of Rousseau and the 'principles of 1789'. Furet goes further to argue that after the social upheaval of 1789, the theologies were needed in an attempt to reconstruct the fragmented society as only the ideas had been able to hold people together. The ideologies turned out to be too abstract, and the appliance of them to society was too ambitious and so authoritarianism was reborn through the Terror. Furet's argument closely followed that of Burke, who had almost prophesised this dark time in French history. This interpretation marked one of the most regarded view of the revisionist school on social factors and their importance leading up to the French Revolution, however the argument launched by Furet may be criticised for its lack of varying evidence, and over use of abstract terms. Study of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*, which Furet based the 'principles of 1789' upon, contradicts Furet's claim that it was too abstract, the document had been quite clear on how the principles can be applied.

Opposing any notion of claiming the Enlightenment was at the root of the Revolution's events was Alfred Cobban, who argued that the revolutionaries had no philosophical plot and acted only out of material desire. For Cobban, the Enlightenment had an issue of being too inconsistent to relate to a revolutionary plan. The *philosophes'* impact subsisted only in the 'age of reform' that began in 1770, and thereafter all traces of the ideologies' influence disappeared. To illustrate his argument that the Enlightenment was irrelevant, Cobban almost entirely omitted any mentions of it in his text *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution*. Contrasting with Marxist history, Cobban argued that France had not changed following the Revolution; there had been no rise of the bourgeoisie and the capitalist title bestowed on them by historians such as Lefebvre was only true for 13% of the class[12]. To demonstrate that the Enlightenment had little effect on the revolutionaries in 1789, Joan Macdonald, a student of Cobban's, published that readership of Rousseau's *Social Contract* was limited to only a few thousand people before 1789. This argument seemed persuasive, until it was discovered that the findings by Mornet were inaccurate [13], and therefore the analysis of Rousseau's influence by Macdonald and other historians cannot be wholly accepted on the terms of the misleading figures being their foundation. After reviewing Macdonald's book *Rousseau and the French Revolution, 1763-91* (1965) Leigh concluded 'I do not know where Dr. Macdonald got this information, but the fact is that all of these statements are wrong'.

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10 Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution* (Princeton University Press, 1947)

11 François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1981)

12 Alfred Cobban, *A History of Modern France* (Penguin Books, 1965)

13 R. A. Leigh, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (The Historical Journal, 1969)

For Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, the place to search for evidence of the Enlightenment's influence was the *cahiers.* Although the *cahiers* of the Third Estate were preoccupied with financial grievances, as George V. Taylor had pointed out previously, Chaussinand-Nogaret inspected the nobility's complaints to argue that their call for reform of the church and hostility to the *Ancièn Regime* was based on the rhetoric of the Enlightenment. This was taking Lefebvre's argument that the Enlightenment had been the ideology of the bourgeoisie, and the evidence that sales of the *Encyclopédie* were particularly high within the upper classes[14] supports this notion that the bourgeoisie, along with the nobility collectively knows as the 'notables', felt with conviction that they had become enlightened and must create a liberal state to promote the individual. Chaussinand-Nogaret's argument has caused the reconsideration of the Enlightenment, as something that was perhaps more influential than first appears, especially in the upper class who were arguably the most active group in the early stage of the Revolution.

It appears that there is some agreement between historians that the revolutionaries either believed or simply claimed for justification that they were inspired by the ideologies of the *philosophes*, however there is still much debate surrounding the reasons for the declarations, whether it was for material reasons as Cobban argued, or because the intellectually elite nobility were convinced ideas of utility, freedom, and equality could be put into actuality. There still remains a difficulty in assessing the influence of philosophies in any event, what some consider to be a link between an action and an ideology may not be true at all because the interpretation of ideas is so subjective, something that was evident during the Reign of Terror. Perhaps, as William Doyle suggested, historians have preferred to accept arguments denying the Enlightenment's influence, presented by those such as Cobban, because they 'removed the need to set sail on the treacherous waters of the history of ideas'[15] allowing the study of more concrete causational factors, such as the fiscal crisis, or the political upheaval.

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[14] Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment. A Publishing History of the Encylopédie, 1775-1800* (Cambridge, 1979)

[15] William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 1989) p.27

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